# Writer Marlon James Reimagines a Watershed in Jamaica; Jamaican writer Marlon James is drawing rave reviews for his novel, 'A Brief History of Seven Killings.' The book is a fictional, kaleidoscopic take on the 1976 assassination attempt on reggae star Bob Marley and its aftermath

Farley, Christopher John



## FULL TEXT

At the Calabash book festival in Jamaica this year, after a party with luminaries like Salman Rushdie, Kingston-born novelist Marlon James ducked out for a late-night snack with writers including Colum McCann ("Let the Great World Spin") and Zadie Smith ("White Teeth"). After the literary stars settled into a roadside restaurant, all eyes turned to Mr. James. What should everyone order? He made some recommendations and then proceeded to beguile his fellow diners with stories about the Caribbean and literary life.

"Marlon is funny and gossipy in a good way," Colin Channer, one of the founders of Calabash, wrote in an email. "What he loves more than anything, though, is reading. He's a book geek."

With his new novel "A Brief History of Seven Killings," the 43-year-old Mr. James has earned a seat at the table with some of literature's brightest stars. The book, Mr. James's third, has sparked rave reviews, including one from Publishers Weekly that declared it "should be required reading."

"A Brief History of Seven Killings" is a fictional, kaleidoscopic take on the 1976 assassination attempt on reggae star Bob Marley and its aftermath. The book spans the 1970s to the 1990s, travels from Kingston to Miami, and has a range of narrators, including hired killers, CIA agents, a music journalist and a middle-class Jamaican woman who is one of Mr. Marley's former lovers. (Read an excerpt from the book.)

Mr. James, who has been a professor in the English department at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn., since 2007, talked to The Wall Street Journal about his new novel, his Jamaican roots, and how comic books have influenced a generation of novelists.

What do you remember about the 1976 assassination attempt on Bob Marley and where were you at the time?

I was going to school. I was just coming out of the Jamaican version of kindergarten. It would have been December so I would have just turned six. I would have been barely six for a week. I remember the way a kid remembers. I don't remember it having any direct impact on me at all. Because my mom was on the force, she was a police detective. So you know it in terms of hearing adults talk about it. It came on the news. I remember the first thing I thought was "Bob Marley's here?" Because by then he'd become this star abroad...The sense I got, and I can view it

through hindsight but I probably didn't figure it out then, was that a line was crossed. You just had this sense that if he could get shot, anybody could get shot. All bets were off.

Why write a novel instead of a nonfiction book about the assassination attempt? Are there things that fiction can do in this case that nonfiction can't?

I think in this case, yes--because in nonfiction there are certain things that you're just never going to know. Or at least you're not going to know right now. I also ran into problems when I tried to focus only on these guys, only on the men who tried to kill him. The novel reached dead ends quite a few times because their stories don't really go beyond that event...So it's almost impossible to get at the core of the story. And I'm not sure that in this case that nonfiction would have served it.

Your character "The Singer" is never named but it's clear he's Bob Marley. Tell me why you never gave the character a specific name in the novel.

At first I had his name in a lot of parts of it, but for whatever reason it just wouldn't work because even before the event, by 1976, Marley was largely symbolic. He was symbolic of a lot of things--of overcoming poverty, symbolic of the voice of the voiceless. But also symbolic to some people of a national embarrassment, because here was this Rasta being looked upon as this voice of Black struggle, and he wasn't educated and he would never be a part of the Black Arts Movement and he was not an intellectual. So he symbolized a lot of things to a lot of people and I think he still does in a lot of ways.... Plus if you put Marley in anything he's going to overshadow it. Without even trying he's going to take over.

What did your dad do?

My dad passed away in 2012. He was a cop as well. So at one point I had both parents being police. My mom went on to become a detective, my dad wasn't as into it and so he quit the force around 1973 and he became a lawyer. He was a lawyer for most of his life and then he became a judge. My mom stayed on the force. She retired early. She was with criminal intelligence....They worked in Kingston. We all lived in Portmore. Portmore wasn't as volatile... My upbringing was very middle class almost to the point of dull.

Do you remember them taking home any of the cases they were working on? Did they discuss anything violent happening on the job?

Not really. Most of what I know about their lives I overheard. Every now and again my mom would give a cryptic message like "Don't go to that area next week"....I was fully aware of the dangers of her job. My dad was a criminal lawyer at one point in his career, and even when he was a judge, he ended up consorting with some very dangerous men...Sometimes writers overplay their hard background. My background wasn't hard at all. A crisis for me was deciding who I liked better, Starsky or Hutch. But at the same time, especially post-1976, there was a sense that anything could happen, and I mean that in the worst way possible. Something might not happen today, and it might not happen tomorrow, but it could. And I think that's what made my parents more uneasy than anything else. Not that something would happen, but that it could. Safety was off the list of things you could guarantee.

When did you decide you wanted to be a writer?

That's hard--especially in Jamaica where it's not like you get up and decide to be a writer. My generation was still part of "You must be a lawyer" or "You must be a doctor," kind of thing...Even after my first book ["John Crow's

Devil"], I didn't decide I was a writer. It was when I wrote the second book ["The Book of Night Women"], I got to the point where I decided I can't do anything else. You get to the point where you ask if you weren't a writer, what else would you be? And I just have no answer. There is no anything else.

What were your earliest memories of books around the house?

My dad was not a prose guy at all. So there was a lot of poetry, particularly the Romantics. When I went to clear his desk after he died, the two books that were open on his desk were Kahlil Gibran's "The Prophet" and Coleridge's "Lyrical Ballads." He was a huge fan of poetry and Shakespeare. That I got from him--the obsession with Shakespeare. My mother was drawn to short stories like O. Henry. She collected Reader's Digests, so a lot of the novels I grew up thinking I knew, I realized I didn't know, I only knew the Reader's Digest version of it. But I grew up reading a huge swath of fiction because of these Reader's Digest compendiums... A lot of what shaped my literary sensibilities were things like comics: Batman, Superman, X-Men. The sort of cheap pulp fiction.

Should readers be surprised that so many top novelists like Junot Díaz, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Lethem and you were profoundly influenced by comics?

Comics suggest possibility. That's our magical realism. The idea that storytelling can still be a world of wonder is something I think we got from comics. Even when I describe a scene, the details I pick first, I realize I'm still doing it comic style even though I'm writing it.

How did you manage to maintain the separation of the voices in your book?

I had to keep tabs on all of them. It's almost as if I became my own CIA. I actually had a literary chart on my wall. People don't believe me when I tell them--they think I'm an organic plotter and I'm not. I had a chart up on the wall with all the characters and their traits and time of day and where they are at this part of the novel and what they're doing. It was hard to keep track of them because there are a lot of characters. Some of it was just a process of discovery. There are a lot of discarded pages. The number of discarded pages in this novel is as big as the novel. Because I was figuring out stuff.

There are some big books, like David Foster Wallace's "Infinite Jest," where you get a sense that the author is swinging for the fences. Did you try to write a big book?

I did. But I ran away from the idea when I was writing it because it sounds so pompous. I did try to write an epic. The thing is I was actually ashamed of it. Because I knew it was going to be a big book. And when my agent asked--we were signing the contract for the book--"What do you think the word count will be?" I think I went a good 50,000 less than it ended up being...

I didn't want to be one of those guys saying I'm writing a big novel. But I knew it was going to be big because I knew it could never be one person's story. I knew I wanted to really linger in these characters and forget plot...

I was reading tons of big books. One was James Ellroy's "American Tabloid," which may have been the biggest of all the influences on this book. I was actually a lot more influenced by crime fiction. Because I kind of wanted to write a crime novel in a way. What else was I looking at? Orhan Pamuk's "My Name is Red." Which is a very big book--they just compressed all the type to make it look small! Two [Don] DeLillo books--"Libra" and "Underworld." "Underworld" because of "coincidence"--correlating events that are not exactly related but couldn't have happened any other way. He is very good at that.

You once wrote in a blog post that "The biggest problem faced by the writer of atrocity is his own talent, that his highest aesthetic value becomes his lowest weakness. By transforming atrocity into art, atrocity is no longer atrocious." "A Brief History of Seven Killings" is a very violent book. How did you avoid turning the atrocities you write about into pretty prose?

Trial and error. I'll write it and think, this went too far. Or write it and think this didn't go far enough. I'll write it and pull back and use restraint. You have to use judgment. It's very important to me that horror remain horrifying. And violence remains violent.

You left Jamaica when you were around 36. How are you coping with the weather in Minnesota?

Oh my God. I'd love to say you get used to it. Nobody ever gets used to it. Chicago's weather is terrible, too, but it's basically the same kind of terrible every year. Here, you just never know. You deal with it. I've been here seven years. Minnesota doesn't slow down because there's a snowstorm.

Do you think this book is going to boost tourism in Jamaica or hurt it?

That is a very good question--because of the amount of times I have heard that I have hurt Brand Jamaica! I've gotten the whole I'm "presenting a bad image" and blah blah blah. Hello, have you heard of "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo"? And how that book helped put Sweden on the map? Have you read it? And it was originally called "Men Who Hate Women"! It's this savage critique of society. But the thing I think we sometimes don't realize is that it's not the savage critique that put it on the map, it's the idea that this is a place of stories and of drama. But I'm sure I'll hear the chorus. Because I've gotten it before.

Credit: By Christopher John Farley

## DETAILS

| | |
|---|---|
| **Subject:** | Writers; Novels; Reggae; Assassinations &assassination attempts; Black history; Books; Nonfiction |
| **Publication title:** | Wall Street Journal (Online); New York, N.Y. |
| **Pages:** | n/a |
| **Publication year:** | 2014 |
| **Publication date:** | Oct 2, 2014 |
| **Section:** | Life and Style |
| **Publisher:** | Dow Jones &Company Inc. |
| **Place of publication:** | New York, N.Y. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Country of publication:** | United States, New York, N.Y. |
| **Publication subject:** | Business And Economics |
| **e-ISSN:** | 25749579 |
| **Source type:** | Newspaper |
| **Language of publication:** | English |
| **Document type:** | News |
| **ProQuest document ID:** | 1566913025 |
| **Document URL:** | https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/writer-marlon-james-reimagines-watershed-jamaica/docview/1566913025/se-2?accountid=17215 |
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| **Last updated:** | 2022-11-19 |
| **Database:** | ProQuest Central |

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