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The Book We're Talking About: 'A Brief History of Seven Killings' By Marlon James

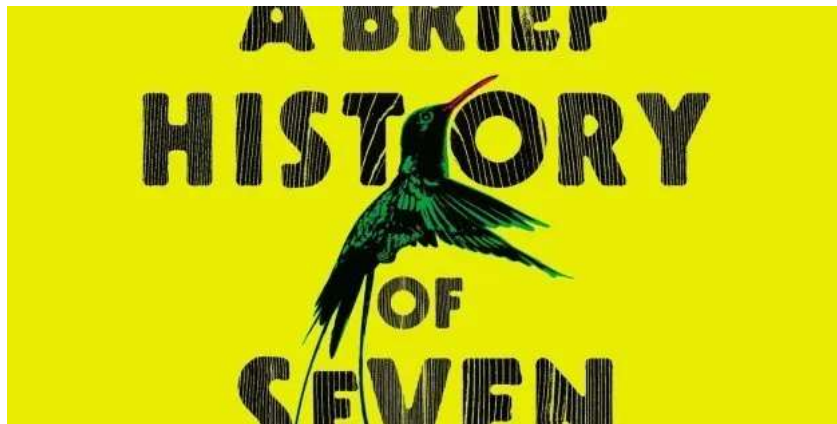
The Book We're Talking About

By Claire Fallon

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Updated Dec 10, 2014



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[A Brief History of Seven Killings](#)

by Marlon James

Riverhead Books, \$20.00

Published Oct. 2, 2014

The Book We're Talking About is a weekly review combining plot description and analysis with fun tidbits about the book.

What we think:

James' third novel is one of our [Best Books of 2014](#) for good reason -- epic, immersive, acutely observed and deeply moving, it's worth every long hour it demands of the reader.

In 1976, Bob Marley was in Jamaica to play a concert before the upcoming general election in hopes of quelling unrest and calling for

peace. Two days before the concert, seven gunmen burst into his home and shot Marley, his wife, his manager, and several others, leaving all of the victims fortunately alive but wounded.

This earthshaking event forms the cornerstone of James' vast, ambitious novel that stretches from 1976 Jamaica to 1991 New York, examining the ripple effects of American colonial interference, Jamaican turf wars, the rising drug trade, and, specifically, that 1976 assassination attempt on the world-famous singer.

James narrates through a wide array of characters, drawing from the perspectives of a dead former politician, an American journalist from Rolling Stone, Jamaican dons and gang members, a girl who hoped her one-night-stand with Marley would be her family's ticket out of the conflict-wracked country, and even some of the doped-up, desperate kids conscripted to carry out the assassination attempt. Marley and his family don't speak for themselves and even recede to the background; this story is predicated on the reggae star, but it's not his story.

The cacophony of different narrators can be overwhelming, as James captures each speaker with a unique cadence and perspective distinct to his or her identity. Delving through the assorted vernaculars and streams of consciousness -- often those of deeply frightened, traumatized, or heavily drugged people -- can range from tough to harrowing reading. It's undeniably worth the work, however, as James' meticulous characterization makes his writing exceptionally vivid and compelling.

Through his speakers, James shows the planning of the assault, the immediate fallout, and the attempts at retribution -- highlighting a dark side of the singer commonly seen as a peaceable figure. As time goes by, and the shooting drifts into the past, however, the consequences linger; not every shooter has come to justice. As the fragile, post-shooting peace between the two dominant gangs in Kingston inevitably crumbles -- one character notes, "Peace can't happen when too much to gain in war" -- the remaining assailants have become pivotal figures at the heart of the burgeoning cocaine trade between Colombia and the U.S.

This dangerous, but profitable, turn to trafficking solidifies the status of central character Josey Wales, don and gang leader, but exacerbates the renewed, cascading cycle of poverty and brutality surrounding him. In the bleak neighborhoods of New York where his

enforcers prowl, and the streets of Kingston, the infusion of crack and, eventually, heroin -- and the accompanying profits -- provide a new pretext for casual violence and constant squalor.

Meanwhile, the past continues to haunt the central characters -- including journalist Alex Pierce, who can't stop digging around for the true story of what happened in 1976, when he was in Jamaica on assignment for Rolling Stone; and Nina, a local girl who scrabbles for years to escape her past, leaving her name, her home, and eventually her country, because of what she saw that night.

James' long, sprawling, masterfully woven together novel finds its redemption in the indomitability of the human will to live, and its light in a sly, sardonic humor that finds its way in amongst the horrific violence and grinding, Sisyphean cycle of misery. Though it by no means makes for a brief read, or an easy one, it's a brilliant, heartbreaking and searing one that will burrow its way deep into the reader's soul.

What other reviewers think:

[The New York Times](#): "It's epic in every sense of that word: sweeping, mythic, over-the-top, colossal and dizzyingly complex. It's also raw, dense, violent, scalding, darkly comic, exhilarating and exhausting -- a testament to Mr. James's vaulting ambition and prodigious talent."

[NPR](#): "*A Brief History* is, with dozens of characters and motives, impressively dizzying. Ultimately, it's also a beautiful mess."

[The Independent](#): "This is a book the energy, intelligence and intellectual range of which demands and rewards attention."

Who wrote it?

This is Marlon James' third novel. His previous novel, *The Book of Night Women*, was a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist. His first novel, *John Crow's Devil*, was a Los Angeles Times Book Prize finalist for first fiction and was a New York Times Editors' Choice book. James was born in Jamaica and now lives in Minneapolis.

Who will read it?

Fans of complex, multi-narrator epics and challenging stream-of-consciousness prose stylings. Also, readers interested in fiction that digs into the thorny issues of race, class, drug trade and political corruption.

Opening lines:

"Listen.

"Dead people never stop talking. Maybe because death is not death at all, just a detention after school. You know where you're coming from and you're always returning from it. You know where you're going though you never seem to get there and you're just dead. Dead."

Notable passage:

"Jamaica never gets worse or better, it just finds new ways to stay the same. You can't change the country, but maybe you can change yourself. I don't know who's thinking that. I'm done with thinking, quite frankly. Every time I think it takes me to a bus exploding or me looking down the barrel of a gun. Shit, all that shaking is me, not the couch. I mean, settee. Goddamn, that man is changing me. I like to act like I don't like it. But I don't think I fool him."

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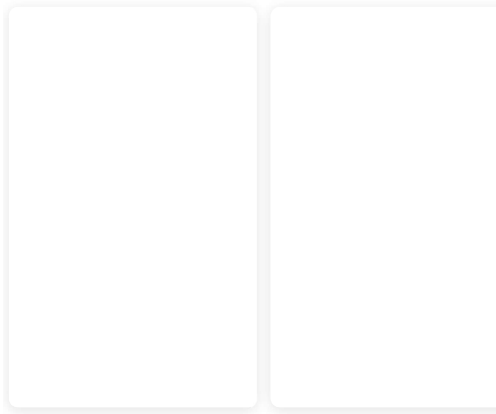
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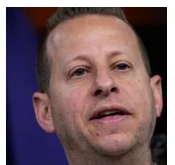
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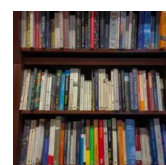
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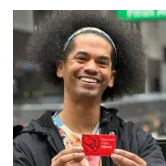
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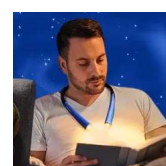
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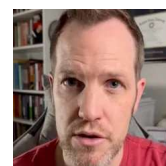
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