Conspiracy, high modernist touches and Bob Marley

Is this love?

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Marlon James

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SEVEN KILLINGS

688pp. Oneworld. Paperback, £8.99.
978 1 78074 635 7

Bob Marley, The Hague, 1976

There's a particularly long, hard-to-forget sex scene in *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. Like every other depiction of physical intimacy in this novel, it is startling in its gruesomeness, but it also goes some way to pinning down that strange, slippery thing: the mind in the bedroom. Weeper, who made his reputation as a dependably violent gangster in Kingston, Jamaica and is now selling crack cocaine in New York City, has spent the evening with a "white boy" whom he picked up on the street. "Last night he was another mind who find out something new", says Weeper the following day about his companion. "I shut him mouth and show him what my hole was for. I love you – I don't mean that, I said."

When the other man kisses him on waking, Weeper immediately recoils – he normally draws the line at tenderness – but admits, to himself at least, to quite liking the feeling. After providing a breathless internal commentary on the sex that then ensues – "he reach something and somewhere that make me jump and no I don't wonder if this is how woman feel . . . " – Weeper lies back and ruminates: "In bed and so soft we feel like two faggot. We sound like two faggots. So what? Then we must be faggots". In the end he seems comfortable with the blurred boundaries: there's no real contradiction in being a bad man from the ghetto and being a faggot too. A bad man can also, it happens, be a reader of Allen Ginsberg and Bertrand Russell (the latter is "the most top of the top ranking", in Weeper's opinion); we only see an incongruity if we have a very narrow view of gangsters or, for that matter, Jamaicans.

The Jamaican author Marlon James's third novel (which was recently longlisted for the Man Booker Prize) specializes in correctives to fixed ideas, about criminal life and about James's homeland, too. Another of its talking heads – the story, which ranges across two decades of Jamaica's history, is told through a dozen or so first-person accounts – is a white American journalist, Alex Pierce. Arriving in Kingston, Pierce is shocked to hear ABBA on the radio: he was expecting "everybody (to) be pumping some Big Youth or Jimmy Cliff". The hotel bellboy whom he asks for directions to the nearest reggae club has to point out that "not every Jamaican sells the collieweed, sir". The outside world has its expectations of how this country ought to be, but its people are forever defying those expectations, and perhaps taking pleasure in it. "I swear this is something I've only seen Jamaicans do", says Pierce later, when a gangster abruptly drops his broad smile. "A sudden change of face that just runs cold. Eyebrow in a frown, but eyes dead steady. It can make a ten-year-old kid frightening."

The kids in *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, like the adults, tend to be on the scary side. Most of those seven killings take place during an especially bloody period for Jamaica: the late 1970s, when rivalry between Kingston's shanty towns developed into something approaching civil war. Among James's narrators, who are a mixture of street-level participants in the conflict and foreign, largely uncomprehending observers, is a terrifying youth known as Bam-Bam. As a small child, Bam-Bam sees his father shot point-blank in the head while being forced to fellate a local gangster. Later adopted by one of the city's most powerful criminal fraternities, he takes naturally to a life outside the law (the name Bam-Bam comes from his fondness for playing with live ammunition). "It really was nothing to kill a boy", he says about his first time, before offering his own explanation for the death rate in his neighbourhood. "Killing don't need no reason. This is ghetto. Reason is for rich people. We have madness."

Bam-Bam's coolness about homicide makes him an obvious choice to carry out the narrative's central act, the crime that sets off the killings of the title. This is an attack on a figure referred to throughout only as "the Singer", but who, as a musician who rose from the Kingston slums to international fame and a position as a sort of national conscience, is plainly Bob Marley. Real events blur into the fictive continually in this novel: Marley survived an assassination attempt in December 1976, when a group of armed men broke into his home, but the perpetrators, and their motives, are still unknown. James invents identities for the mystery gunmen – as well as Bam-Bam, they include Weeper and a reactionary Christian, and psychopath, called Josey Wales. Taking up a popular conspiracy theory, James also suggests the shooting was commissioned by an alliance of the Jamaica Labour Party (the country's right-wing opposition party) and the CIA.

The Singer's closeness to the governing People's National Party is a cause of tension. A general election is approaching and neither the opposition nor the Americans can afford to have so influential a figure endorsing such a party – one that seems to be moving more and more leftwards, in the direction, it is feared, of Cuba. "Rastas look like they turning socialist", says Bam-Bam.

Like Marley, though, the Singer is only wounded. The cocaine in the system of a number of the men is probably to blame – James has them narrate the shooting in druggy streams of consciousness that capture the euphoria and chaos of it all: "I goin' be one of the man who kill HIM which is like the man who kill Jesus I wish me woman could sing to me I wish me did dead from ghetto sickness from polio or scurvy or dropsy", says one. A temporary break in gangland warfare follows the attack, but it can't hold; "this don't name peace", says Josey Wales, "this name stalemate". A heavy atmosphere of predestination hangs over the novel (one narrator is a ghost who offers us glimpses of action yet to come), and the men who almost killed Jesus know how they'll be made to pay.

Those who are not found, tortured and eliminated in Kingston by the Singer's supporters make their way to the United States, where the second half of the book unfolds. Here the story takes on another historical focus: the major role of Jamaican gangs in the East Coast crack cocaine trade of the 1980s. This brings in new voices, yet more violence (leading to a bloodbath in a Bushwick crack house that Quentin Tarantino ought to film) and much plotting. At times it is too easy, amid the tangle of gangland rivals, drug lords and corrupt politicians, to lose track of who has ordered a hit on whom. Getting lost in the intrigue, though, is a large part of the game: for all the high modernist touches of its monologues, this is also unashamedly a conspiracy thriller, as elegantly convoluted and as dense with surprise as the genre demands. Over several hundred further pages of scheming, come-uppance draws nearer for the remaining culprits, slowly and very tensely.

You might take or leave the ingenuities of the plot, however, and concentrate instead on the testimonies that move that plot forward. As suspenseful as it is, the triumph of this novel is its voices. "Tell the truth I don't like it either", says one character about Jamaica. "It's hot like hell, traffic is always slow, and the people not all smiling and shit, and nobody waiting to tell you no problem, man. It is shitty, and sexy and dangerous and also really, really, really boring". The shittiness, sexiness and danger of the country all come through in *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, but there's little of the boredom; this is the fault of the narrators, who have too much life in them – are too sharp, funny and unguessable – to put across a sense of everyday monotony. It's a sign of Marlon James's unusual brilliance that a book so much about death is also teeming with life.