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Gangster's paradise

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A Brief History of Seven Killings

Marlon James

Oneworld, 688pp, 18.99 [pounds sterling]

A nine-word Jamaican proverb serves as the epigraph for Marlon James's 700-page novel: "If it no go so, it go near so." The proposition --that this made-up story might as well be true to the life of the country, or certainly truer than any straight history would be--immediately recalls Salman Rushdie's proviso, from his 1983 novel, Shame: "The country in this story is not Pakistan, or not quite. There are two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same space, or almost the same space. My story, my fictional country exist, like myself, at a slight angle to reality. I have found this off-centering to be necessary; but its value is, of course, open to debate." That debate is decided by the success of a writer's melting down of history and politics to fuel the roaring engine-works of a novel about the life and times of a people. And James's sprawling, daunting, messy effort is a great--if grim--success.

The grimness: the Jamaica that emerges from James's impressive third novel is an often vile and perpetually violent place, populated by kill-or-be-killed shanty-town gangsters whose moneymaking ventures and vendettas are fully fused with prominent figures and important events in the country's history. This is nowhere more evident than in the book's departure point, the December 1976 shooting of Bob Marley, shortly before he was to headline a peace concert. Marley had proposed the concert because Jamaica was riven with conflicts--between the government and opposition parties, each of which was in cahoots with a rival street gang, and between rival geopolitical cold war opponents. By the mid-1970s, Prime Minister Michael Manley and his party were aligned with communist Cuba, while the opposition found its support from anti-communist American elements, including the CIA.

Rather than try to provide a clarified account of this convoluted situation, James gives it maximum voice and shape on the page. The book features a Russian-sized "Cast of Characters" that lists hundreds, many of whom, in a Jamaican riff on that other Russian tendency in books, go by multiple names, nicknames and aliases. These hundreds clash and orbit around the novel's centre of gravity, the assassination attempt on Marley (called "the Singer").

Caribbean crossing: Marlon James in New York, where his novel concludes

We meet them through the guttural, patois-filled monologues of dozens of characters who occupy an array of positions in its turbulent world. These include the swaggering and vicious "dons" in command of the warring gangs; ambitious, conniving and ever-striving gang members high and low; tough if fretful women who become involved with stupid and dangerous men; cynical CIA operatives; an American journalist recklessly obsessed with telling the story of who shot Marley; and also a dead founding-father-style politician who first introduces us to this "story of several killings, of boys who meant nothing to a world still spinning".

James, who grew up in Jamaica, is a professor of English at an American university: he knows exactly how he could have made the novel easier for us. He could have privileged the Faulkner-inspired dead parent-figure narrator as a higher authority for discerning the meanings of events in the book, and he could have deployed the American journalist character as our reliable guide. Instead, attesting to his admirable commitment to a truer rendering of a "Jamaica Gone to Hataclaps" (apocalypse), these are just two voices among many, all of which struggle to understand, endure, prevail in and escape from a world where far too many young men find far too much reason and encouragement to "grab me gun and think how I want to kill kill kill this pussyhole and nobody going get to kill him but me and I want to kill kill kill and it just feel so good, so raasclaat sweet every time I say Kill kill kill that the echo in the room sweet too".

This typically graphic and cadenced voice emerges from the taut lead-up to the all-guns-blazing assault on Marley's compound, the first of two especially violent sequences. The 20-year fallout of the failed assassination--which leaves the Singer with a bullet lodged in his arm, as the doctor tells him that an operation would interfere with his guitar-playing--includes revenge killings, intra-gang power struggles, switches in political and geopolitical allegiance, and clouds of suspicion. It also involves a flow of people from Jamaica to New York, which becomes a hub-cum-charnel house for competing Jamaican gangs trafficking in Colombian cocaine by the 1980s. The novel's second significant sequence of violence is a terrifying shoot-out at an infernal New York crack house filled with dealers and thugs, addicts and their children.

Though brilliant as a literary accomplishment, James's work is frequently hard going in reading terms, given the outsized stew of players and motives and the hyped-up prose that conveys it all. At times he risks coming across as overly indulgent of his penchant for maximalist effects. But, in giving us the fullest sense of this world, it proves to be a risk worth running. There are a few bright narrative threads to pull you through the chaos, one featuring the novel's alpha-don, the self-styled Josey Wales. From beginning to end, he is responsible for more madness and mayhem than anyone else. He is also, ironically, the character who best captures the only plausible peace to be had in Marlon James's Jamaica: "Peace is blowing a little breeze on my daughter forehead when she sweat in her sleep." She, too, is eventually gunned down.

Randy Boyagoda's novel "Beggar's Feast" is published by Penguin

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