



Marlon James interview: 'I didn't want to fall into a pornography of violence'

Jamaica-born Marlon James's novel about the attempted murder of reggae legend Bob Marley comes pretty close to naming names. Chris Harvey meets the Booker Prize shortlisted author

By Chris Harvey

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Nineteen seventy-six. Reggae is the hottest new sound around. Bob Marley is on the brink of global stardom; the Rolling Stones are in Jamaica trying (and failing) to mimic the joyful sass of Cherry Oh Baby for their Black and Blue album, but a different song tells the story of the times.

Would-be star Junior Murvin auditions his song Police and Thieves for legendary producer Lee “Scratch” Perry. They record and rush-release it. Murvin sings of “police and thieves on the streets, scaring the nation with their guns and ammunition”. His sweet falsetto conceals a nightmare. Gang warfare and police brutality are out of control. Kingston is in meltdown.

It is against this turbulent backdrop that Jamaican-born writer Marlon James’s sprawling, ambitious third novel, *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, is set. Soon to be an HBO series, for which James is writing the pilot, it brings to shocking, vivid life the wider story behind the carnage. How, as the 1976 general election loomed, crime and violence on the streets of Kingston took on a political dimension. Large areas of the city, controlled by rival gangsters, divided into factions supporting the ruling socialist government of Michael Manley’s People’s National Party (PNP) and their conservative opposition, the Jamaican Labour Party (JLP). How the US, fearing another communist republic in the Caribbean, sent in the CIA to infiltrate and influence events. How attacks by the rival factions worsened, and the police cracked down with draconian force. More than 800 people were killed – cops, innocents and those on both sides of the conflict.

- Bob Marley: a reggae legend in pictures

Marley agreed to perform a peace concert in December, endorsed by Manley. But it was a dangerous time to be identified with either party. On December 3 1976, armed men stormed Bob Marley’s Kingston mansion, and shot the singer, his wife and his manager. Marley escaped with minor wounds; his wife Rita and manager Don Taylor were seriously injured, but survived.

Marlon James’s parents were both in the Jamaican police (“my mother went all the way to detective, my father became a lawyer”). He was only six at the time of the assassination attempt – he is now 45 – but he remembers the atmosphere of fear that it generated. “Everybody heard about it. Marley was untouchable, so if he could be shot, anybody could be shot. I knew my parents were scared, even if I couldn’t understand why. There was a sense that anything could happen.”



A Brief History of Seven Killings author Marlon James: "I wanted to give my characters desires, dimension, contradiction"

A Brief History... is told through the disparate voices of many characters. James introduces us to teenage gunmen, gangland enforcers, ghetto "dons", politicians, groupies, music journalists, CIA men and even the ghost of a murdered politician lamenting that no one listens to the dead any more. The book moves beyond the attempt on Marley's life, beyond his death from cancer in 1981. James follows his characters into the cocaine trade and to New York in the Eighties, where Jamaican gangsters enjoyed a reputation for extreme violence.

It's an extreme book altogether, reminiscent – in its sense of characters converging on a single point in time, towards a defining event – of American crime writer James Ellroy. The younger writer acknowledges the "huge influence" of Ellroy's American Tabloid (in which all roads point to Dallas, Texas, on a particular day in November 1963). A Brief History... also shares Ellroy's unflinching attitude towards violence. I mention one passage in which gangland boss Papa Lo is haunted by his murder of a schoolboy and "the way he looking at you, him eye frighten as f--- because death is the scariest monster, scarier than anything you dream up as a pickney..." as he clings to him in the final moments of life.

"I didn't want to fall into a pornography of violence but I think violence should be violent," says James. "I find the violence in PG13 movies unbearable. This kid will never

run home, never have another birthday. His death is slow, nightmarish. And you have to explore the consequences – the people who live on with this death.”

He mentions Faulkner's As I Lay Dying as another major influence on the novel, but ascribes his determination to find complexity in all his characters, even the most vicious murderers, to his admiration for Greek tragedy. “I think the Greeks were the only people ever to nail character. Their heroes are deeply flawed. They murder, they rape, they kill children.”

The novel is rooted in first-hand sources and fact, James says, but not in his own experience. He grew up in the dormitory town of Portmore, outside Kingston. “There was never a single murder in my neighbourhood, there was barely a robbery. It was so suburban, it was almost disappointing.”



Kingston rioting: political unrest in Jamaica, 1976 (Photo: Alex Webb / Magnum Photos)

It was a middle-class childhood and the influences on it were international – MTV, Eurythmics, the Cure, the Smiths. “What really hit me about The Smiths was people singing about their lives. Reggae’s not about that. I’d never heard people talk about jealousy, ambivalence, confusion.” He remembers being in his room drawing comics in 1985-86, and hearing the Pet Shop Boys’ West End Girls. “It opened up a whole new world of wonder.”

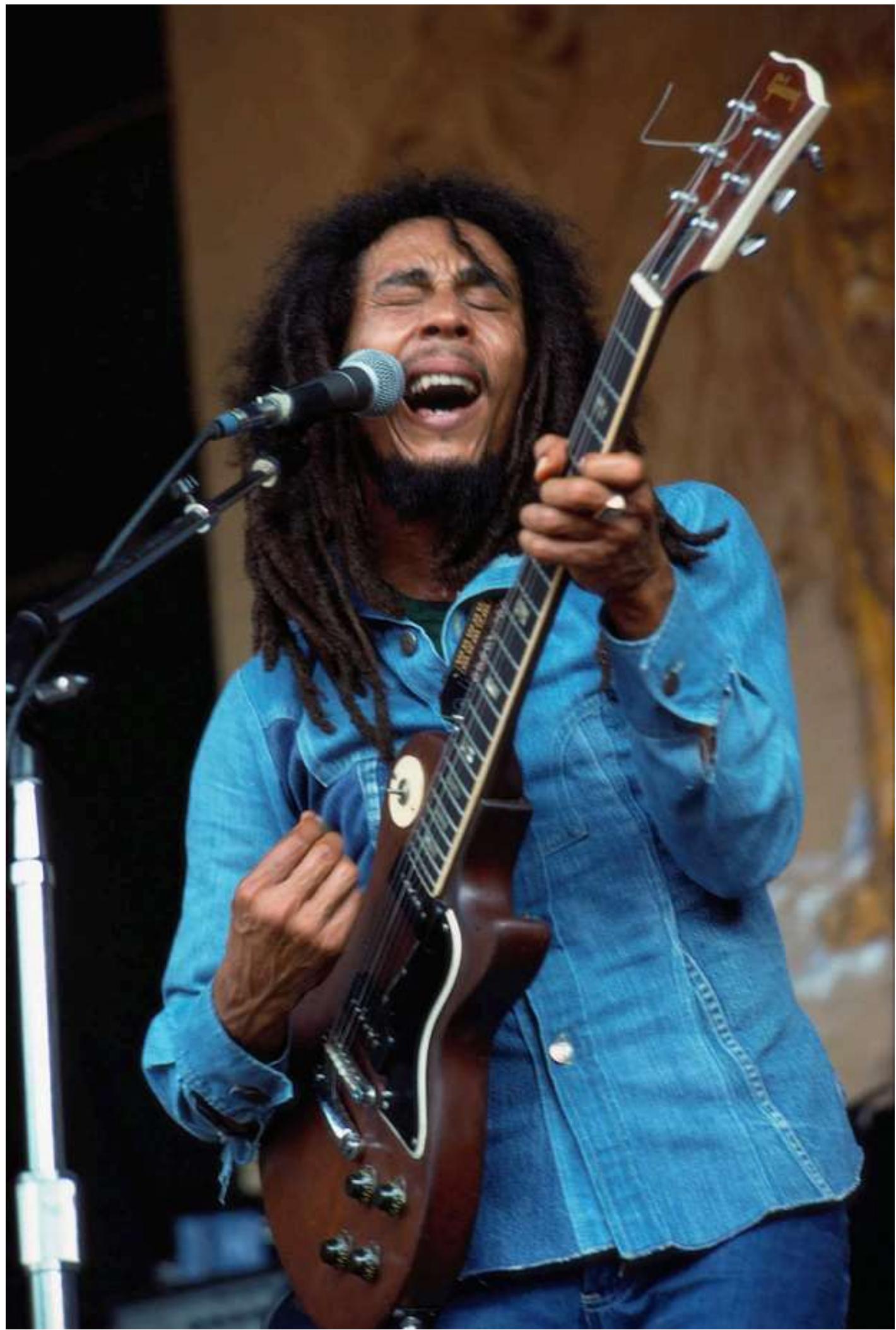
James is gay; not a simple thing to admit openly in Jamaica at the time. I ask him if he identifies at all with the gay character in the novel, the murderous, literature-quoting gangster Weeper. “I don’t know if any of me found its way into that,” he says. “But it was very important to me that there were gay characters in the book – to reflect the gayness and hypocrisy in Jamaica.” For a period, when he was still in Jamaica, James tried to have a straight relationship. It gave him a sense of validation, he says. Did he have to leave Jamaica to explore his sexuality? “Not so much explore,” he says. “But simple things – you might want to walk down the street and hold somebody’s hand one day. When you grow up in a homophobic country, you’re sitting on a timebomb.”

- **A Brief History of Seven Killings by Marlon James, review**

In a brilliant essay he wrote for The New York Times earlier this year, he described himself at 28, as “so convinced that my voice outed me as a fag that I had stopped speaking to people I didn’t know”.

He had, he wrote, “reached the end of myself”. It was reading Salman Rushdie’s Shame – “a hand grenade inside a tulip” – that awakened him to the possibility that “the present was something I could write my way out of”.

Nine years later, in 2005, aged 34, he published his first novel: John Crow’s Devil. It led to a job teaching creative writing at Macalester College in St Paul, Minnesota, where he still lives. “I no longer looked over my shoulder in the dark,” he recalled. In 2009, he published an acclaimed second novel, The Book of Night Women, an account of life on an 18th-century Jamaican sugar plantation, seen through the eyes of a woman born into slavery. To create the narrator’s voice, he admits, he had to overcome his own prejudices about language.



He describes his “British, Victorian” education at a Jamaican high school, where he studied Shakespeare and Dickens and was taught to idealise and “strive to be like people from a country that’s not my own, to be ashamed of the language spoken in Jamaica”. It’s not hard to see why Marley would be an irresistible figure for James.

For his parents and their friends, the first educated class of a Jamaica that had only been independent since 1962, Marley was a figure of suspicion. In the book, Papa Lo wonders if “The Singer” realises his “real haters are blacker than him”, and that many of those think that a ganja-smoking Rasta becoming the face of black liberation is a public relations disaster for the country.

- **Bob Marley: 10 revelations about the reggae legend**

“He was half white, he was never really black, and he spoke terribly,” says James. “He was seen as a disgrace, and people forgot it. In 1976, Rastafarians were one of the most violated, persecuted groups in Jamaica. They could be beaten within an inch of their lives, or detained for two years, just for being found in a ‘proper’ neighbourhood. It’s ironic that I have dreadlocks now,” he adds, “ – that my father lived to see it.”

Marley is never referred to by name in the novel, only as “The Singer” (“I wanted him to be symbolic, in the way that when you refer to The Master, it could only be Henry James”). “No scene with him in was made up.” Papa Lo, James says, is loosely based on real-life gangland don Claude Massop, who was killed by Jamaican police in 1979; his character Josey Wales on Jim Brown – real name Lester Lloyd Coke – who was at least partly responsible for the rise of violent Yardie drug culture in America and Britain. Brown was facing extradition to the US on drug-related charges when he was burned to death in his Kingston jail cell in 1992.“Most of the characters are composites,” says James, “I had somebody write to me who said, I know you’ve said that, but I’m sending you this. And he gave me a two-page list of all the characters, and who they were. But for the most part, the characters really aren’t based on individuals. Jim Brown, for instance, would never have tolerated a gay gang member like Weeper, and he was not tall and Chinese-looking.”



Marlon James: “I didn’t want to fall into a pornography of violence but I think violence should be violent”

James’s white characters, such as CIA station chief Barry DiFlorio and Rolling Stone journalist Alex Pierce, presented a further challenge – “could I write ‘the other’ without falling into the same exoticism trap that white guys writing about black characters fall into? There was a danger of that, the ignorant, racist white guy, the cultural tourist white guy, the white guy who always says the wrong thing, they’re just as bad as the black stereotypes.

“I wanted to give my characters desires, dimension, contradiction. With the CIA, there’s a very global sense that they are the ‘bad guys’. I wanted to write about the inner lives of these men instead.”

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In the past, James has discussed the theory of how white depictions of black experience are often presented so that even the worst horrors visited upon black people are viewed as learning experiences for white characters. I ask him how he saw 12 Years a Slave – whether it felt to him like a film directed by a black director (Steve McQueen) or the product of a white film industry. “It did feel like the film of a black director,” he says, pointing to its depiction of “casual cruelty – when somebody breaks a glass in someone’s face just because they can. Even liberal artists draw the line at casual cruelty...

institutionalised brutality, yes; sadism, not so much. It means you have to accept a level of cruelty that your ancestors were capable of that you may not want to.”

I ask him about the “black **Game of Thrones**” that he is rumoured to be writing. “I’m very interested in writing about the African empires of the Middle Ages and Dark Ages, and the supernatural creatures in their belief systems.” As a TV series or a novel? “I’ll write it as a book,” he says. “On a very practical level building a screen universe out of a novel is an advantage. With a screenplay you’re already starting out with a limited universe.”

As for his screenplay for A Brief History..., he says, “It will turn out to be an international story. You can’t tell a story about Jamaica in 1976, without telling the story of Ecuador in 1976, Washington in 1976, London in 1976.” The attempted assassination of the biggest reggae star in the world will still be at its heart, though. “There were seven, eight, nine people involved, but only two or three have names. Nobody talks about the others, but the impact of what they did goes on.”

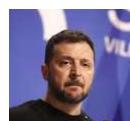
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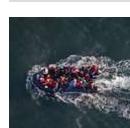
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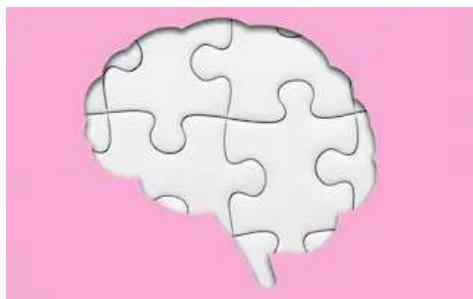
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