

Jamaica Via a Sea Of Voices: [Review]

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ABSTRACT

The characters include politicians, gang enforcers, C.I.A. operatives, Cuban Bay of Pigs alumni, corrupt police officers, various fixers, drug traffickers, musical hangers-on and a Rolling Stone journalist named Alex Pierce who seems at least partly based on White, and whose efforts to piece together the story behind the attempted assassination form the spine of this cacophonous book.

FULL TEXT

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SEVEN KILLINGS

By Marlon James

688 pages. Riverhead Books. \$28.95.

How to describe Marlon James's monumental new novel "A Brief History of Seven Killings"?

It's like a Tarantino remake of "The Harder They Come" but with a soundtrack by Bob Marley and a script by Oliver Stone and William Faulkner, with maybe a little creative boost from some primo ganja. 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.

"Brief History" uses the story of the 1976 assassination attempt on Marley as a kind of trampoline, bouncing off that terrible event into a multilayered, choral inquiry into Jamaican politics and poverty, into race and class, and into the volatile relationship between the United States and the Caribbean. Spanning several decades, the novel attempts to trace connections between the gang wars in the Kingston ghettos, C.I.A. efforts to destabilize a left-wing Jamaican government in the 1970s and even the crack epidemic in America in the 1980s.

How did such dynamics come to intersect around Marley? His fierce, poetic songs had given voice to the lost and disenfranchised in Kingston and around the world. But if the "ghetto sufferers" embraced him as a kind of saint articulating their dreams of liberation, some conservatives in Jamaica (and beyond) saw him as a rabble-rousing Rasta revolutionary, while politicians sought to exploit his fame for their own ends.

As Marley's biographer Timothy White wrote, the country's rival political parties -- the right-wing Jamaican Labor Party (J.L.P.), thought by many to have ties to the C.I.A., and the left-wing People's National Party (P.N.P.), which had friendly relations with Castro's Cuba -- both employed armed goon squads to look after their interests. And as tensions mounted in the run-up to a general election in 1976, Marley found himself caught dangerously in the middle.

"Brief History" draws heavily upon White's "Catch a Fire" and a 1991 article that he wrote for Spin magazine. But Mr. James, who was born in Kingston in 1970, is really interested in using both the facts and the speculation surrounding the murder attempt on Marley as a portal into Jamaican culture and politics. Marley (who is referred to here almost always as "the Singer") becomes an almost peripheral figure in this novel, as the story focuses in on fictional versions of "the people around him, the ones who come and go."

Narrated by an assortment of characters (many speaking in Jamaican patois), "Brief History" features a cast so populous that readers may initially find themselves consulting the list of dramatis personae at the book's beginning just to sort out who is who. The characters include politicians, gang enforcers, C.I.A. operatives, Cuban Bay of Pigs alumni, corrupt police officers, various fixers, drug traffickers, musical hangers-on and a Rolling Stone journalist named Alex Pierce who seems at least partly based on White, and whose efforts to piece together the story behind the attempted assassination form the spine of this cacophonous book.

These people are connected by politics, business and/or sex, and their complicated transactional relationships provide a harrowing view of Kingston as a dog-eat-dog world of opportunists, where everyone seems to be using everyone else -- Americans and Jamaicans, women and men, thugs and politicians and informants.

Peace -- between the political parties and between rival gangs -- can't happen, says one character, "when too much to gain in war"; when there is money to be made by playing one party off another; when, as another says, "bad times is good times for somebody." As for the poor, tyrannized by local gangs and by the police, their most basic needs ignored by politicians: "Plenty people even in the middle of sufferation going pick the bad they know over the good they can only dream about, because who dream but madman and fool?"

For many of these people, the United States is not the Rastas' oppressive Babylon but the place that's produced the movies and television shows that form the tent poles of their imagination (touchstones like "High Noon," "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance," "Dynasty," "The Sons of Katie Elder," "Starsky & Hutch," "The Dukes of Hazzard"), a place that beckons with the promise of money and status and simple creature comforts. "Me just want to bathe inside not outside," says a gang member named Demus, "and me want to see the Statue of Liberty and me want Lee jeans and not idiot jeans that some thief sew on a Lee patch."

Mr. James's characters, old and young, male and female, Jamaican and American, exhale their thoughts in language that is casually profane, and as kinetic and syncopated as music. Many of this novel's chapters are written in a kind of patois stream of consciousness, which, however confusing at first, works to immerse the reader in the world in which Marley grew up, the world that gave birth to reggae.

We also see Kingston through the eyes of the outsider Alex Pierce, who labors to persuade sources that he wasn't "some stupid white boy waiting for the limbo party," and who describes the Kingston ghetto as "a smell": "Sour chemicals in the detergent, cocoa butter, carbolic acid, lavender in the soap," fermenting urine and aging excrement running down the side of the road, along with "cordite from a recently fired gun," "the iron in blood congealed from street kill, still there after the body has been removed." From "this stew of pimento, gunshot blood, running water and sweet Rhythms comes the Singer, a sound in the air but also a living breathing sufferah who is always where he's from no matter where he's at."

Mr. James's 2009 novel, "The Book of Night Women," focused on a young slave woman on a Jamaican sugar plantation at the turn of the 19th century, and in "Brief History," he once again demonstrates his gift for creating a remarkable female character: Kim-Marie Burgess, a woman with "a nose for tribulation" and a determined survivor who will change names and identities, reinvent herself again and again, move from man to man, take one awful job after the next, running away from Kingston and the past (and maybe something dangerous she's witnessed) and running toward her dream of making it to America and what she thinks is safety.

"Two years since the election," she says. "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."

Photograph

Photo

DETAILS

Subject:	Books; Novels
Literature indexing term:	Author: James, Marlon, 1970-; Author's work: A Brief History of Seven Killings The Book of Night Women
People:	James, Marlon (1970-)
Company / organization:	Name: Riverhead Books; NAICS: 511130
Publication title:	New York Times, Late Edition (East Coast); New York, N.Y.
Pages:	C.1
Publication year:	2014
Publication date:	Sep 22, 2014
column:	Books of the Times
Section:	C
Publisher:	New York Times Company
Place of publication:	New York, N.Y.
Country of publication:	United States, New York, N.Y.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
ISSN:	03624331
CODEN:	NYTIAO
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Book Review
ProQuest document ID:	1564082909
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/jamaica-via-sea-voices/docview/1564082909/se-2?accountid=17215
Copyright:	Copyright New York Times Company Sep 22, 2014
Last updated:	2022-03-05
Database:	ProQuest Central

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