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Marlon James on 'A Brief History of Seven Killings'



Sara Rubinstein / Chicago Tribune

Author Marlon James in his Minneapolis home on September 26, 2014, his recent novel is *A Brief History of Seven Killings*.



By **STEVE JOHNSON**

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But rather than diminish interest in his bloody, sprawling, not-at-all brief examination of Jamaica through the prism of the attempted murder of singer Bob Marley on his home island in 1976, James only increased it.

His Chicago Humanities Festival discussion Saturday afternoon with Trinidadian poet Roger Bonair-Agard was at times technical, satisfying the curiosity of those who wonder about how writers write. To keep his 10 “Brief History” narrators straight in his own mind, James did only “one voice a day,” he said. The Jamaican writer, who teaches at Macalester College in Minnesota, also kept detailed plot charts to, one, keep track of the details of his complex narrative and, “two, not to play favorites” among the narrators.

The book, recently awarded the United Kingdom’s top literature prize, the Man Booker, for best English-language novel, grew on him, the 44-year-old author said: “The very first paragraph I wrote for this book is now on page 458.” And the language shifted too: “The original was in good Jane Austen standard English,” James said, but “it just began to feel really false.” So he shifted to writing mostly in a Jamaican patois truer to his characters.

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On a grander level, James said “Brief History,” his third novel, was the first “where I sort of let go of what I thought a novel should be.” This meant setting aside concerns about audience expectation and structural formality, for instance. “It’s the first novel where I said, (the heck with) that, the novel in my head was going to be the novel on the page.”

Key to that was the attempt on the life of Marley, who, James made clear to the audience at Fourth Presbyterian Church, was so much more than the good-vibes reggae man revered in American fraternities. “As long as I knew what the central event was, I could go all over the place,” James said.

Saturday’s conversation ranged widely, too, touching on international cricket, James’ self-described nerdiness in childhood and the contemporary situation in Jamaica. “So much great art ... the sports are doing well ... and the politics are still (terrible),” James said.

But the talk’s central event was the existence of the novel, rooted in 1976, a year the author described as “such a crazy, convoluted, creative, beautiful, horrible, dangerous year.”

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