



Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas

ISSN: 0890-5762 (Print) 1743-0666 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rrev20

A Brief History of Seven Killings

Hugh Hodges

To cite this article: Hugh Hodges (2016) A Brief History of Seven Killings, Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas, 49:1-2, 222-223, DOI: [10.1080/08905762.2016.1256620](https://doi.org/10.1080/08905762.2016.1256620)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08905762.2016.1256620>



Published online: 17 Feb 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 34



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

A Brief History of Seven Killings

Marlon James

New York: Riverhead Books, 2014

Hugh Hodges

It seems unlikely, this late in the game, that a short review of *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is going to influence anyone's decision about whether to read the book or not. If the list of its awards, culminating in the 2015 Man Booker Prize, wasn't persuasive, then the hundreds of reviews piling up adjectives in an attempt to capture the sheer virtuosity of the book surely must have been. I'm going to assume that anyone reading this has already started reading it, and is now looking for advice about where to fit it on their bookshelf when they have finished. I have three suggestions.

1. Put it next to Michael Thelwell's *The Harder They Come*. One of the first reviews of *A Brief History*, by Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times*, likened it to a "Tarantino remake" of the film that Thelwell's novel is based on, with "a script by Oliver Stone and William Faulkner". Marlon James is working on an adaptation for HBO, and Kakutani's description may turn out to be prescient (although James's unflinching depictions of violence are more Lars von Trier than Tarantino, more grimly verité than gleefully cinematic). However, it's Thelwell's novel, not the film, which *A Brief History* most clearly echoes. Both books are epic, encyclopedic, employing multiple narrators in an attempt to comprehend the whole of Jamaica at a moment in its history. And *A Brief History* picks up approximately where the earlier book leaves off, almost as if continuing the earlier novel's narrative. But there are crucial dissimilarities. Despite its fragmented, multi-vocal narrative, *The Harder They Come* revolves around one character, the singer and badman Ivan, a tragic hero who represents both the strengths and the flaws of his society. *A Brief*

History has no such tragic center. Certainly, much of the narrative circles around Bob Marley and the failed attempt on his life in 1976, but he never becomes a character in the story. The fact that he is only ever referred to as “the singer” emphasizes that he is absent, the center the story doesn’t have. *The Harder They Come* reads meaning in (or into) ghetto life, shaping its fragments into the recognizable form of a tragedy, but *A Brief History*’s fragments refuse to cohere. This is partly because, where Thelwell’s Jamaica has both a traumatic colonial past and a rich folk tradition to contain and make sense of it, James’s has no memory before the late 1960s; it truly has a brief history. Perhaps the difference here is that *The Harder They Come* is a postcolonial novel; writing in 1980, Thelwell still hoped that an affirmation of a cultural identity that survived colonialism could form a bulwark against postcolonial political violence. But *A Brief History* is written from the other side of that hope’s failure. It is a post-postcolonial novel.

2. With that in mind, put it next to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*, Chris Abani’s *The Secret History of Las Vegas*, Teju Cole’s *Open City*, Okey Ndibe’s *Foreign Gods Inc.*, and Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go*. Marlon James is part of generation of writers from Africa and the West Indies who arguably have more in common with each other than with their postcolonial, national foreparents. Most of them are U.S. educated, most teach either literature or creative writing in the United States, which is where they all set their fictions, in part or in whole. Stylistically diverse, they nevertheless share a cosmopolitan awareness of globalization’s effects and a willingness to confront its local horrors. In this respect, *A Brief History* is particularly unflinching and relentless.

3. So perhaps don’t put it on the shelf at all. Like von Trier’s films, *A Brief History* is compelling, challenging, and not something one is likely to revisit in a hurry. It is a testament to James’s stylistic genius that the book keeps readers on the hook for six hundred pages despite being uncompromisingly unlikeable and despite having not a single character anyone is going to miss when they are done. On the other hand, it is a book readers are going to want to talk about with someone else who has experienced it. So pass it on.

Hugh Hodges is Professor of English literature at Trent University. He is the author of Soon Come: Jamaican Spirituality, Jamaican Poetics (2008).