The Harder They Come

Marlon James's novel examines complicated politics and the growth of gang violence in Jamaica.

By ZACHARY LAZAR

"WELL, AT SOME POINT you gotta expand on a story," a character observes late in Marlon James's new novel, "A Brief History of Seven Killings." "You can't just give it focus, you gotta give it scope."

An American journalist named Alex Pierce is explaining himself to a group of Jamaican drug lords, members of the Storm Posse, who have tracked him down in Brooklyn and are threatening to kill him if he doesn't rewrite his next article according to their specifications.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SEVEN KILLINGS
By Marlon James
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It's 1991, and Alex knows both too little and too much about the gang violence that has bedeviled Jamaica since its independence in 1962. Like all writers, he is a clueless person looking for a clue. Novelists, in particular, are plagued by this urgent sense of unknowing. James, Pierce's creator, is so inquisitive that he goes beyond what can be established as historical fact and invents what lies beneath, those thoughts and emotions that can never be known for certain.

"A Brief History of Seven Killings" is based in part on the real-life story of the Shower Posse, who began their rise in early-'60s Kingston and spread to America, where, by the 1980s, they controlled much of the crack trade in New York and Miami — in the book, they form an alliance with Griselda Blanco of the Medellín cartel.

The partnership echoed another one, when Jamaica's prime minister Edward Seaga and his Jamaica Labour Party used the gang as enforcers in the slums of Tivoli Gardens (called Copenhagen City in James's novel), which became that party's fief. Both the J.L.P. and their rival party, the P.N.P. (People's National Party), had armed gangs in their service, for whoever controlled the slums controlled Kingston, and whoever won the Kingston vote won the nation's elections.

This turf war led to spiraling poverty and savage violence. It was the kind of trauma described and transmuted into song by the great Bob Marley (referred to in the novel as the Singer), who in 1976, amid unprecedented bloodshed, announced a free concert to promote peace in Kingston. (Marley was himself caught between the J.L.P. and P.N.P., along with their criminal gangs.) At the same time, outside forces including the C.I.A., anti-Castro Cubans and the Colombian drug cartels were converging on Jamaica with money and guns.

If all this sounds confusing, it's because it's true. On Dec. 3, before he could give the peace concert, Marley was ambushed at his house by a band of gunmen, shot twice, and almost murdered. After that, organized crime in Jamaica went international.

There is always too much history to keep track of — the daily news is itself an impossible barrage — and so a certain kind of novel has evolved to shape narratives out of such chaos, not to find answers, but to capture the way history feels, how it maims, bewilders, enmeshes us. If, like James, you're from Jamaica, then recent history might suggest a gangster chronicle, and the central plot and metaphor of his novel is an intricate set of connections between the attempted assassination of the Singer and the rise and fall of a J.L.P.-connected crime boss called Josey Wales. The man who comes to kill the Singer, icon of peace, is a gangster whose export business is not reggae but cocaine. It doesn't matter whether this hypothesis is factually verifiable. It isn't. What matters is whether the story is persuasive and suggestive.

It helps that James, as in his "John Crow's Devil" (2005) and "The Book of Night Women" (2009), is a virtuoso at depicting violence, particularly at the beginning of this book, where we witness scene after scene of astonishing sadism, as young men and boys are impelled by savagery toward savagery of their own. This, again, is how history feels to those on the wrong side of it, and the novel's great strength is the way it conveys the degradation of Kingston's slums. Even through the sometimes preposterous voice of his journalist character, James renders it vividly: "Zinc in the Eight Lanes shines like nickel. Zinc in Jungle is riddled bullet holes and rusted the color of Jamaican rural dirt. . . . Ghetto is a smell. . . . Old Spice, English Leather and Brut cologne. The rawness of recently slaughtered goat, the pepper and pimento in goat's head soup." Such passages reveal what this novel fundamentally is: an epic of postcolonial fallout, in Jamaica and elsewhere, and America's participation in that history. In the end, the book is not only persuasive but tragic, though in its polyphony and scope it's more than that.

Indeed, the further I read, the more the book's increasing sense of absurdity, its pop culture references, its compulsive ventriloquism and its range of tones — comic, surreal, nightmarish, parodic — began to remind me uncannily of David Foster Wallace's all-or-nothing "Infinite Jest." (I even began to wonder if the book's title, obviously ironic given its length, was a homage to Wallace's "Brief Interviews With Hideous Men.")

'Both of we smarter than the ghetto, but only one really get out.'

This eclecticism sometimes had the odd effect of distracting me from the courage of James's book, which is after all an exploration of real-life acts of violence. One central character, for example, is a woman named Nina Burgess, who flees the gang wars of Kingston to start a new life in New York, as a caregiver to an elderly rich white man. When they engage in mild flirtation, Nina thinks: "I know this part, I've watched 'Dynasty.' I should ask him if he'd like a drink. . . . Which isn't going to happen though he really does look like Lyle Waggoner and I heard Lyle posed for Playgirl."

Perhaps out of a desire to make Nina more than just a victim or a stereotype, James gives her these sardonic thoughts, though they tend to obscure her loneliness and terror (she is literally running for her life). The virtue of irony is that it creates discomfort, and although I struggled at times with James's irony, it allowed him to write beautifully without writing too beautifully, which would have been a different kind of problem.

"Some people have this thing 'bout themselves, maybe is a ghetto thing where even if another man don't destroy you, you going destroy yourself," James writes later, more powerfully, in the voice of one of Kingston's lost souls. "Every man in the ghetto born with it, but somehow the Singer cure it. You look 'pon the two of we in a picture, both of we smarter than the ghetto, but only one really get out."

The speaker is imprisoned at Rikers Island. The Singer is now dead, never to be replaced, but the succession of gangsters goes endlessly on. Spoof, nightmare, blood bath, poem, "A Brief History of Seven Killings" eventually takes on a mesmerizing power. It makes its own kind of music, not like Marley's, but like the tumult he couldn't stop. □

Marlon James

PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY SKEMP

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