

BOOK REVIEW

# ‘A Brief History of Seven Killings’ by Marlon James

By **John Freeman** Globe Correspondent, October 4, 2014, 6:00 p.m.



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Let's start with the title. This is not a brief history of seven killings. Marlon James's epic new docu-novel about Jamaica in the throes of political upheaval is a thrilling (and sometimes exhausting) exegesis on the idea of island history itself. It is an epic told in a series of miniature riffs, bursts of voice and song shouted into the swirl of history's desire for tidy narratives.

Here is the island's story written not by the winners, but the losers. Among its 70-plus characters are prisoners, kidnappers, mothers, cops, drug pushers, gay gangsters, bangers with names like Funky Chicken and Bam-Bam, a CIA operative, abandoned children, the beat-down, the bad. Sound like a lot? "What kind of journalist you be if you don't want to know the backstory?" a prisoner asks a man who visits him in the Rikers Island jail.

Drawing on several recent works of reportage as well as his own shoe-leather, "A Brief History of Seven Killings" seems to ask a similar question. From the street up, James presents Jamaica in the wake of independence as a series of unraveling threads through the voices of over a dozen narrators. Moving from Kingston in the late 1950s to New York in the 1990s, the book depicts, among other things, gang wars, the island's garrison politics, the CIA's involvement in them, the corrosive drug trade to Miami and New York, and Jamaica's tortured confusion over race.

The center of the book's massive orbit is a 1976 attempt to assassinate reggae singer Bob Marley. In the mid-1970s, the Singer, as he is referred to throughout the novel, was building up to release his great album, "Exodus" (1977). Meanwhile, the island that made Marley was coming apart at the seams. Food shortages dominated, and guns were everywhere. Following the departure of the British overlords, infrastructure had deteriorated. As in so many states molested by colonial powers, political parties — here the People's National Party (PNP), which leaned toward Cuba, and the conservative Jamaica Labor Party (JLP), backed by the CIA — filled the power vacuum with their militias.

In the 1970s, as his star rose abroad, Marley was caught between these two parties and their increasingly violent enforcers. James easily could have told us that story alone, the tale of a man wrestling with that responsibility, his life in danger, his dream collapsing. Indeed, there are scenes to that effect. But mostly James has focused on doing something far more interesting: jumping from one voice to the next, he reveals why a singer like Marley had to exist, and what made his existence and songs so dangerous.

In doing so, James has written a dangerous book, one full of lore and whispers and history. Somewhere a CIA agent is reading this book very closely.

Still, with all these layers, there are too many characters to keep track of, even with a list of *dramatis personae* that sprawls over four pages. A significant portion of them overlap in ways that slows this big beast of a novel to a crawl, and in his equal love for all his cast James misses an opportunity to allow the characters who do live and breathe a chance to develop more.

The characters that work have incredible voices. James was born in Kingston in 1970 and has written two other densely-imagined novels set in Jamaica, “John Crow’s Devil” and “The Book of Night Women,” but neither prepares readers for the force and energy of “A History of Seven Killings.” The short, lyrical chapters explode on the page in a fabulous range of registers, from stream-of-consciousness profanity and patois to the professional drone of politicians. The best voices sound so vivid it is as if they were recorded, which in fact a journalist in the book is doing.

“A Brief History of Seven Killings” draws a great deal of its drama from power struggles. On a macro-level, there is the CIA trying to unseat Jamaican President Michael Manley, pumping the island full of guns to destabilize it. Within Jamaican society, there are the dons that run the gangs, men like Papa-Lo, who worked his way up and now runs Copenhagen City, a neighborhood wracked by political violence. He in turn is in the crosshairs of another gangster named Josey Wales as are others as the action shifts to drug wars in Miami and New York.

James elegantly keeps us following these internecine battles, but the book’s most memorable characters are the ones history would probably overlook. Chief among them is Bam-Bam, a gang member who witnesses his father and mother murdered in hideous fashion. Papa-Lo takes him in and gives him a gun. Bam-Bam’s voice climbs the scales from poetic grief to syncopated bravado, a deeply sad music. You can see how a boy raised into a man in this fashion would look at a beacon like Marley and say, “The only light now is on the stage and I lost in the darkness.” And: “You don’t need to look at me for the same reason God don’t look at man.”

Two propulsive powers move this great book forward. History, on one hand, turns on with its inexorable mysteries. Marley's murder is plotted and failed; and the aftermath gets ugly. Simultaneously, there is the attempt to understand these events, which arrives in the form of Alex Pierce, a Rolling Stone journalist sent to the island to write a story. He loses the plot, too, though. "The more I gave the man booze," he says during one interview, "the more he kept talking, and the more clear he got, the more things didn't add up."

A similar feeling nags at the reader as this big, lumbering saga coils its great weight into a final sprint. The truth, as we think of it, is ultimately not knowable. James nibbles at theories of who did what and why, and scripts Marley's quest for revenge with the pace of a thriller. His achievement, however, goes far beyond opening up this terrible moment in the life of a great musician. He gives us the streets, the people, especially the desperate, the Jamaicans whom Marley exhorted to: "Open your eyes and look within:/ Are you satisfied with the life your living?"

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John Freeman is the editor of "Tales of Two Cities: The Best and Worst of Times in Today's New York," out in October from Or Books.

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