

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SEVEN KILLINGS

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ABSTRACT

An assassination attempt on Bob Marley stokes this sweeping portrait of Jamaica, encompassing a host of gangsters, CIA agents, journalists and businessmen.

FULL TEXT

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An assassination attempt on Bob Marley stokes this sweeping portrait of Jamaica, encompassing a host of gangsters, CIA agents, journalists and businessmen. Marley is never mentioned by name in the third novel by James (The Book of Night Women, 2009, etc.). But "the singer" is unmistakably him, and the opening chapters, set in late 1976, evoke an attempt on his life sparked by tensions between gangs representing rival political parties. (In reality, as in the novel, the singer was wounded and went into exile in England.) And though we never hear Marley in his own voice, James' massive novel makes room for pretty much everybody else's. Most prominent are Papa-Lo and Josey Wales, kingpins of the Copenhagen City gangs; Barry, a cynical CIA agent with orders to stop the march of communism though the red menace is the least of the island's problems; Alex, a Rolling Stone reporter assigned to cover Marley who becomes enmeshed with the gangs; and Nina, who had a fling with Marley. As in his previous novels, James is masterful at inhabiting a variety of voices and dialects, and he writes unflinchingly about the violence, drug-fueled and coldblooded, that runs through the island's ghettos. Moreover, he has a ferocious and full character in Nina, who persistently reboots her life across 15 years, eventually moving to New York; her story exemplifies both the instinct to escape violence and the impossibility of shaking it entirely. But the book is undeniably overstuffed, with plenty of acreage given to low-level thugs, CIA-agent banter and Alex's outsider ramblings about Jamaican culture. James' fiction thus far is forming a remarkable portrait of Jamaica in the 19th and 20th centuries, but the novel's sprawl can be demanding. An ambitious and multivalent, if occasionally patience-testing, book.

Audience: Adult

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