

THINGS TO DO > BOOKS

## Review: 'A Brief History of Seven Killings' by Marlon James



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"A Brief History of Seven Killings," the third novel by Kingston-born author Marlon James, opens in Jamaica on Dec. 2, 1976. One of the first characters we meet is Alex Pierce, a journalist for Rolling Stone who's on assignment in the island country and intent on doing anything but his assignment. Rather than tail Mick Jagger to generate gossip for his employer, he's consumed by a larger story — one more urgent than whether Mick flew into Jamaica with or without Bianca; bigger than Bob Marley's forthcoming peace concert; and more important than even the larger-than-life reggae singer himself.

The general election for prime minister is in two weeks, and tensions are high. The contest between the left-wing People's National Party incumbent democratic socialist Michael Manley, and the right-wing Jamaica Labor Party, which is fighting against Manley's socioeconomic reforms, is coming to a roaring boil. There's word of CIA operatives stationed in Kingston and escalating violence between party-enlisted gangs in the city's poorest neighborhoods. Meanwhile, Marley is seen consorting with top goons from both political groups, drawing scrutiny from many Jamaicans, the most disadvantaged of whom already resent him for his fame and fortune. (Of Marley, a gang member named Bam-Bam poignantly remarks, "The two men who bring guns to the ghetto watch you sing yourself out of their hands and they not happy at all"). Still, inside and outside the country the musician is overwhelmingly adored, and Pierce makes attempts to interview Marley, knowing "a lot of stuff is riding on what he does next."

The headstrong journalist is one of many characters who populate James' fictional oral history of three blood-soaked and corruption-steeped decades in Jamaica. Spanning the 1970s to the '90s, and moving from the slums of West Kingston to the crack houses of New York, the 688-page book, despite its title, is anything but brief. Chapters jump back and forth among characters — politicians, gang members, CIA agents, assassins, drug dealers, addicts, ex-girlfriends and ghosts — several speaking in Jamaican patois (and

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Together, these voices provide a Rashomon-style look at major events in Jamaica's fraught history, including the attempted assassination of Marley and the lingering effects of racism, sexism and violence. But often they're less of a chorus and more a confusing cacophony. Occasionally, gang members' monologues blur together, and certain identities shift over the course of the five-part novel. As with the fiction of Gabriel García Márquez, the reader has to regularly consult the cast of characters listed in the front of the book to put names in context. Add to that the fact that James prefers to use only em dashes to indicate dialogue, and the reader is prone to wonder, so who's speaking to whom?

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Despite what the first third of the novel indicates, "A Brief History" rides on a lot more than Marley. In fact, he isn't even "Bob Marley" here, but simply "the Singer" — a narrative choice that at first feels a bit awkward. Eventually, however, the reader recognizes that the story extends well beyond the reggae icon. The Singer's ambiguity affords James the room to tell it.

Sensitive readers be warned: "A Brief History" contains a Tarantino-like level of graphic violence — sexual, physical, verbal and, yes, stomach-churningly vivid. The reader feels how this cycle entraps virtually all of the characters. "The whole world is a ghetto," says Bam-Bam. "People so poor that they can't even afford shame."

When occasional bits of wry humor interrupt the steady stream of killing and conspiring and rape, it's like one of those funny moments in a horror movie that punctures the tension — and for which the audience is exaggeratedly grateful. A few of the rare laughs come courtesy of Pierce, whose interior monologue is equal parts cocksure and self-deprecating, but most are derived from the enigmatic Nina Burgess, an unemployed receptionist who slept with the Singer once and now seeks his acknowledgment. "Seems like I've been lying to myself about my hair," she quips, catching a reflection of herself after waiting in vain outside the Singer's house. Of her sister Kimmy adopting Rastafari speak, including the expression "I and I," Nina says: "Well God knows what that means, but it sounds like somebody trying for their own holy trinity but forgetting the name of the third person."

James' gifts for characterization are particularly evident in the complex figures of Nina and Kimmy and Papa-Lo, don of Copenhagen city, and his terrifying head enforcer Josey Wales. While some of the narrative could

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**"A Brief History of Seven Killings"**

By Marlon James, Riverhead, 688 pages, \$28.95

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2014 > October > 3

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