ReviewReviewed Work(s): A Brief History of Seven Killings by Marlon James

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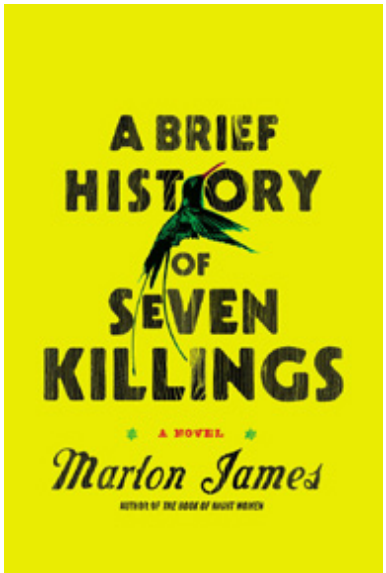

Marlon James, *A Brief History of Seven Killings*

Riverhead Books, New York, 2014, 688 pp
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Abjection Sustained

Marlon James' *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, a large unconventional novel of almost 700 pages, is told for the most part from the ground up. The seven killings in the title refer to the deaths of those who attempted to assassinate Bob Marley (referred to throughout as "The Singer") in December 1976. The novel is presented as an imagined oral history and the first half dramatizes the local and international political context of 1970s Jamaica. The second half of the book, when the action relocates to New York after an alliance is struck between a Kingston gang boss and a Colombian cartel, tells a more conventional gangster story. Two of Marley's surviving would-be assassins and two other characters from the first part of the book provide continuity in the second half.

What is perhaps more intriguing than this bald summary can convey is the many possible readings the novel affords. It could be read as a study of the consequences of Cold War political meddling in local tribal politics, a crime novel or a novel of urban decay—none of which, as a genre, is typical of Caribbean or Jamaican fiction. (James has indeed claimed his influences from further afield, specifically William Faulkner and Roberto Bolano.) Then there is the *roman a clef* aspect, with at least one detailed review assiduously hunting down the parallels between James's characters and actual players in the Jamaica of this period (Tayler 2015). I propose that, in the light of some Caribbean countries' twenty-first century experiences of gang violence, and of some of the highest homicide rates in the world (beyond Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, St. Kitts and Nevis and the Bahamas all spring to mind), what James has offered in his *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is an allegory for the Caribbean abyss.

In a recent *GQ* interview James argued that the work represents his attempt "to make sense of something [his] country went through. Because it makes no sense" (*GQ* 2015). Violence, death and abjection are the central concerns of the text, thus making common cause with his slave plantation-based 2009 novel, *The Book of Night Women* (Becker-Leckrone 32). In *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, the dead and dying speak. It is surely not by accident that the words of the zombie, Sir Arthur George Jennings, open the book with the provocative statement: "Listen. Dead people never stop talking" (1). In this liminal state, abjection is nothing less than the collapse of meaning, the disturbance of identity, system and order occasioned by the ever-present threat to life. For a middle-class character like Nina Burgess, in particular, it is the randomness and possible imminence of death that create fear: "It's not the crime that bothers me . . . I mean, it bothers me like it bothers anybody. . . it's the possibility that it can happen at any time, any second now, even in the next minute. . . Even if it never comes, the point is I'll be waiting for it" (103).

This imminence of death as an aspect of abjection is the staple fare of ghetto life. Six of the eight gangsters who give testaments come to an early, sticky end. The body count by the end of the book is far more than seven killings; people are shot, burnt, hanged, beaten and stabbed. More significantly, apart from a few melodramatic and operatic deaths—by paper knife and syringe—humiliation is a central feature of much of the killing. All of the gangsters who give testimony in Jamaica are physically and psychologically damaged by police violence and gang warfare. They, in turn, use humiliation to control their neighbourhoods and to undermine any notion of a free vote at election time. In such absolutist circumstances, meaning disintegrates. Bam-Bam, given a gun by a shadowy white agent, taught to shoot and told what he is fighting for, is one of the young gangsters who attempts to kill Marley. Bam-Bam observes: "The white man say we're fighting for freedom from totalitarianism, terrorism and tyranny, but nobody know what he mean" (73).

James's elaboration of violence goes beyond the physical to attain a metaphysical dimension, as in the ritualized and even lyrical recognition of the authority invested in a gun. For the ghetto gangster, Bam-Bam, the gun personifies power: "When a gun come to live in the house it's the gun, not even the person who keep it, that have the last word" (72). Demus, another gunman, describes the loading of a gun. His statement is presented in the form of a prose poem that recounts how to load a particular type of gun—a M16A1—and concludes, chillingly: "You won't need to put it back on SAFE" (110).

At times there's a playful, filmic quality to the violence, as when Alex Pierce, a journalist who has set out to interview Marley, uses a letter-opener to dispatch a hardened gunman sent to shoot him. Later, New York gunman, Eubie, and some of his posse, visit Pierce to pressure him to change the text of his forthcoming article. The don, apparently, is a keen reader of *The New Yorker* magazine. After a scene reminiscent of a torture scene in a Quentin Tarantino movie, replete with eloquent and humorous exchanges between torturer and victim, Pierce is left with a bullet through his foot to ensure compliance.

If there is one oversight in this portrait of ghetto life it is the absence of a figure of conscience to complicate the abjection that James portrays. In the late nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche, meditating on the Jewish experience, suggests in *Nietzsche: 'On the Genealogy of Morality'* that such a figure can be found in what he calls the "priestly" class. Extrapolating from his argument it appears that without such an intervention the elite would inevitably experience even more difficulties than they already do in managing ex-slave societies. This is not least because of the sense of victimhood and desire for revenge that slavery harbours for many generations. Several of Marley's lyrics articulate these emotions of victimhood and vengeance, as in "chase those baldheads out of town," "who feels

it knows it, Lord" and "the wicked / carried us away" (from "Crazy Baldheads", "He Who Feels It Knows It" and "By the Rivers of Babylon" respectively) among others. Although Nietzsche's preference was for violence as a cleansing force, the alternative is for victimhood and vengeance to be transformed into a sense of compassion through religion. This is borne out in the Caribbean where religion has been a restraining influence from slavery onwards. The absence of a figure of conscience in James' novel, therefore, serves to emphasize the extent to which abjection characterizes the lives of ordinary Jamaicans. As a result, when Papa-Lo, a leading Don, expresses remorse about killing a school-boy, this is ironized by being mis-identified by those around him as a sign that he is losing his authority.

Much of the book is recounted as either testament or internal monologue. Each short section reveals how the speaker copes, or fails to cope, with violence, death, betrayal, sex and poverty. As lives spiral out of control, each speaker not only recounts his or her version of 'The Singer's' shooting but relates their continued life story, and, in some instances, their harrowing end. The register ranges from the literary to the lyrical to the repetitive and prosaic with no shortage of swear words such as "bombocloth [*sic*]" and "battyhole." Code-switching between Jamaican patois and Standard English permeates throughout. Kingston and New York gangster parlance is also invoked, as well as the contorted English of the Jamaican police with its over-aspirated 'h'-es.

You cannot read *A Brief History of Seven Killings* without being aware that it won the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2015, one year after the competition was expanded to include all English-language novels. As always, when one of its own achieves something exceptional, the Caribbean may, in turn, be tempted to bask in reflected literary glory. But a closer examination of the story and the issues to which James draws unremitting attention, should give those in celebratory mood pause for thought.

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