

# A Brief History of Seven Killings: unwieldy, occasionally tedious – and magnificent

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## FULL TEXT

Marlon James says that when he was writing *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, he wanted it to be “a novel that would be driven only by voice”. The book may tell the story of the attempted assassination of Bob Marley in 1976, but it’s the people around the star who dominate the narrative.

As Carolyn Kellogg wrote in the *LA Times* : “There are patois-speaking street thugs, CIA operatives, Jamaican gang leaders, a magazine writer, a displeased ghost, an American hitman, and a woman who slept with the singer just that once.” And that’s just the start. There are almost a dozen competing voices all offering different viewpoints, opinions, and motivations, all speaking in varying forms of English, from US governmental formality to Jamaican poetry and slang.

It’s an effective way of dealing with a personality as well-known as Marley; rather than run the risk of speaking for the reggae legend, James had everyone else speak about him instead. The result is a 600-page, fictional expansion on the principle that drove Gay Talese’s *Esquire* article *Frank Sinatra Has a Cold* : if you can’t get a direct quote from your subject, listen to everyone around him. You get a broader sense of his psychological, economic, cultural and political impact –not to mention the conflicts and controversies that surround him.

And those other voices have their own fascination, so much so that, by the time Marley’s cancer lifts him out of the book halfway through, he feels like the peripheral figure. He continues to haunt the story, James detailing his slow death with real power and emotion, particularly the horror of the foot injury that preceded it: “Every night you stomp down Babylon from the stage, your right boot fills near the brim with blood.” But by this point all those other voices have taken on so much personality of their own, we want to follow them too.

Another comparable piece of writing is James Ellroy’s masterpiece *American Tabloid*. The crime classic about the assassination of JFK is far more concerned with the various shady characters who provide the narrative than the actual killing of the president. Ellroy makes you “root for the guys” (and women) who are often responsible for the murderous behaviour that gives the book its narrative propulsion. James calls *American Tabloid* his “textbook ...really wanted to stick closer to crime fiction than trying to write this literary novel. I probably failed at that.” (That he won the Booker prize is a good measure of that particular failure.)

There are also valid criticisms to make of *A Brief History of Seven Killings* in comparison with *American Tabloid*. Ellroy’s novel is the work of a far more disciplined stylist. He tells his story harder, straighter and more effectively. James digresses, gets tangled up in small details, lapses into stream of consciousness tedium: “Nobody should laugh everybody should be in misery me never laugh must be two time my entire life and saying my entire life make me feel like me old even though twenty birthday don’t come yet and all me have is me woman and she be a good woman and me running back to her but me not running back to her and I just want to...” And so on.

But any comparisons with *American Tabloid* are bound to be invidious. A good part of the appeal of *A Brief History of Seven Killings* comes from its deliberate lack of brevity, its apparent lack of discipline. The style reflects the chaotic, murky world from which it emerges, where reality is always slipping from its moorings and what truth there is feels brutal:

To throw out the prolixity would be to lose the richness of the prose, and the stridency of those competing voices, that exhilarating sense that they’re going to say what they want to say, whether you like it or not. You’d lose the

fantastic asides, like the story where we learn a character got the name Priest because “him shoot off his cocky”. James is always trying to push the boundaries, be more outrageous, more brutal, more magnificent. “I’m a really, really, really ambitious writer,” he told Vogue. “Why not? I did set out to write a big novel. I tried to write what I thought was a great novel. Whether it succeeded or not, it’s not up to me to decide that. Yeah, I was playing big game.” Perhaps it sometimes feels like James is straining too hard for greatness –but that is always better than not trying.

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