Review: THE BOOKER PRIZE 2016
Reviewed Work(s): A Brief History of Seven Killings by Marlon James; Satin Island by Tom McCarthy; The Fishermen by Chigozie Obioma; The Year of the Runaways by Sunjeev Sahota; A Spool of Blue Thread by Anne Tyler; A Little Life by Hanya Yanagihara
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THE BOOKER PRIZE 2016

MERRITT MOSELEY

The judges for the Man Booker Prize have never been known for their sense of humor. Funny novels seldom win the award; the most recent winner described as comic was Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question* in 2010, but its comedy was sour and intermittent. The 2015 prize selections were no exception to this history of humorlessness. In fact the most successful joke came from two of the titles—Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* is 720 pages long, and, at 688 pages, Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is brief only by contrast. It feels even longer than Yanagihara's book if only because about half of its content is written in Jamaican patois.

These books are not just long, they are harrowing. They constitute a parade of horrors—in *A Little Life* most of them happen to one man, while in *A Brief History* they pervade a society. But this is not exceptional in a year when the six novels on the short list were all, in the words of the chair of the judges' panel, "pretty grim. There's a tremendous amount of violence in these books. If you just told the plot it would be unbelievably grim." He went on to offer the explanation, "you can think of it as a portrait of where we are."

Of course judgments about "where we are" are relative to *who* we are, and the judges who seemingly endorsed this assessment (the decision to award James the prize for his long and blood-drenched novel was reportedly quick and unanimous) were Chair Michael Wood, an Englishman and emeritus professor at Princeton; Ellah Alfrey OBE, a critic and editor; Frances Osborne, the author of several biographies and one novel; Sam Leith, literary editor of the *Spectator*; and John Burnside, an author of poetry and fiction. In some previous years the majority of practicing authors and critics has been leavened by a celebrity—a comedian, actor, or Member of Parliament—but this year every judge was a serious, bookish appointment.

The Booker process occurs in three steps. The first, after some months of mentioning and predicting, occurs when the judges announce the long list. The 2015 long list was made public on July 28. It included thirteen books; of these the largest contingent consisted of five American authors. There were three British authors, a Nigerian, an Indian, a New Zealander, a Moroccan,

Marlon James, *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. Riverhead, 2014. 704 pages. $30; Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island*. Knopf, 2015. 208 pages. $15; Chigozie Obioma, *The Fishermen*. Little, Brown, 2015. 304 pages. $16; Sunjeev Sahota, *The Year of the Runaways*. Picador, 2015. 496 pages. $28; Anne Tyler, *A Spool of Blue Thread*. Knopf, 2015. 384 pages. $16; Hanya Yanagihara, *A Little Life*. Doubleday, 2015. 832 pages. $17.

and the first nominated Jamaican author in the history of the prize, eventual winner Marlon James.

The Booker is nothing without conflict. Generating controversy to increase book sales has been acknowledged by its administrators as one of the purposes of the competition. Publicizing the long list was another way to introduce such controversy. Until recently, despite rumors and alleged leaks, the names on the long list were secret—not often a well-kept secret, but at least officially nobody knew how the large stack of books considered (156 in the 2015 competition, made up from those nominated by their publishers and some others invited by the judges) had been narrowed to six until the release of the short list.

With the 2015 long list, as in every year, commentators concerned themselves with who did not make it. Among the well-established writers whose books fell at the first hurdle were Jonathan Franzen, William Boyd, and former winners Kazuo Ishiguro, Salman Rushdie, John Banville, and Margaret Atwood. In recent years it has become customary to declare that Rushdie was "snubbed" in any year when he could have won it but did not. He seems reconciled, now, to his time having passed. He told the Cheltenham Literature Festival that the judges are "deliberately eschewing established authors in favour of unknown novelists" and that famous authors are now "struggling to remain in contention." He affected to be worried mostly on behalf of Jonathan Franzen, not himself. That Sir Salman's 2015 novel, *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*, is not very good—that where he set out to write a funny book against what he sees as a tide of bleakness, but instead produced some labored whimsy and obvious political allegory—may have been on the judges' minds. The long list was not completely anti-veteran, anyway, including previous nominee Andrew O'Hagan, 2007 Booker winner Anne Enright, and established American novelists Marilynne Robinson and Anne Tyler.

The more stubborn controversy—after all, most of the world's authors are snubbed every year—continues to revolve around the inclusion of American authors. Until 2014 eligibility was restricted to writers from the UK, the British Commonwealth of Nations, and some other former British colonies, though the presence of a Libyan—who was actually born in New York—on the list in 2006, and a Moroccan in 2015, makes one wonder how elastic the criteria were and suspect that any novel in English whose author was not an outright American had a good chance to be considered. In any case, for reasons which were never very compellingly set out, the organizers extended the eligibility to U.S. writers, amidst some angry complaining. I still think it will be a brave panel that gives the Man Booker to an American author for the first time.

The naming of five Americans against just eight long-listed others aroused considerable unease. When the short list came out on September 15, the literary editor of the *Times*, Robbie Millen, raised the white flag in the

face of what he called "an unstoppable Yankee juggernaut." Two of the six short-listed books were by U.S. authors, and Millen believed that Hanya Yanagihara's *Little Life* was certain to be the deserved winner and the two British entries stood no chance. The bookies—William Hill and Ladbrokes, the largest bookmakers in the UK—agreed on *A Little Life* as the favorite. Famously they always announce the odds on the day after the short list becomes public without having read any of the books, basing their odds on other kinds of evidence.

Betting on the Booker has always been a major feature of the prize. In 2014 "Mr Smith," a "mystery punter," won a great deal of money by predicting the winner, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* by Richard Flanagan. He later discussed his methods—he did not read the books, as he does not care for fiction, but instead concentrated on analyzing the judges, their interests and politics. A week or so after the announcement of this year's short list, he began placing multiple bets in different cities on *The Year of the Runaways* by Sunjeev Sahota; the oddsmakers lowered the odds against Sahota and made his book second favorite. Of course neither it nor the Yanagihara title won. The two books' strong backing by "experts" who neither read nor really have any interest in fiction raises interesting questions about how extraliterary considerations affect the judges' decisions.

These little excitements aside, 2015 was actually one of the more ordinary years in Booker Prize history: the short list displays considerable ethnic and national diversity; the Americans were on it, but did not win; history was made when the first Jamaican author even to receive a nomination became the winner. The six finalists were the already-mentioned *A Little Life* by Yanagihara, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* by Marlon James, *The Year of the Runaways* by Sunjeev Sahota (an Englishman of Indian ethnicity), *A Spool of Blue Thread* by veteran American novelist Anne Tyler, *The Fishermen* by Nigerian first-time nominee Chigozie Obioma, and *Satin Island* by the English Tom McCarthy, who was short-listed as recently as 2010 with his ambitious novel *C*. Writing in *The Telegraph*, Tim Martin declared, "What we're left with"—that is, after the removal of most of the famous names—"is a prickly and unusual short-list, full of subversion and unease, which implicitly challenges the idea that reading a novel should be a comfortable and relaxing experience." He predicted, correctly, a win for James, but concluded "For the first time in years, this venerable exercise in literary brow-furrowing has got back some of its spark and zing."

Some time ago the dyspeptic Gore Vidal divided contemporary novels into two categories: "R&R" (rest & relaxation) and "R&D" (research & development). Tom McCarthy is thoroughly avant-garde, both a practitioner of and a propagandist for the research & development book. Even the cover of *Satin Island* raises questions about its nature, declaring it a *manifesto*, a *confession*, a *report*, an *essay*, a *treatise*, a *novel*, with all but *novel*

lined through (or, as McCarthy might say, put under erasure). *Satin Island* is technocratic in many ways and consists of numbered paragraphs—1.1, 1.2, etc.—perhaps to remind the reader of Wittgenstein. The narrator is an anthropologist and ethnographer, named only as "U," employed by a large and shadowy multinational to provide vague services, compile dossiers, and write a grand "Report." At one point he offers this account:

> What does an anthropologist working for a business actually do? We purvey cultural insight. What does that mean? It means that we unpick the fibre of a culture (ours), its weft and warp—the situations it throws up, the beliefs that underpin and nourish it—and let a client in on how they can best get traction on this fibre so that they can introduce into the weave their own fine, silken thread, strategically embroider or detail it with a mini-narrative (a convoluted way of saying: sell their product).

U quite often speaks of how an in-house ethnographer offers insights, but is dismayingly reluctant to offer the reader any insights of value. He notes that there are a lot of oil spills, a lot of parachute accidents, and often starts dossiers, but nothing quite comes together.

This is part of McCarthy's idea of the novel; he is an enemy of realism and of humanism, much influenced by Debord and Žižek and other Continental thinkers. The idea of infusing his book with narrative drive, with a real plot, with human interest (though U has a girlfriend, or sex partner, and a friend who dies of cancer, both relationships are nearly affectless), would conflict with his manifesto, I think. He does explain, in an afterword, that *Satin Island* "like all books, contains hundreds of borrowings, echoes, remixes and straight repetitions." There are clear reminders of Kafka, of Don DeLillo, of William Burroughs, and (to me at least) of Beckett's denial of meaning in human events.

Somewhat to my surprise, *Satin Island* has received mostly positive reviews, despite some complaint of its "grad-seminar babble": a *New York Times* reviewer called McCarthy "a born novelist, a pretty fantastic one, who has figured out a way to make cultural theory funny, scary, and suspenseful—in other words, compulsively readable." He is more easily compelled than I am. McCarthy *wants* his book to be chilly and resistant to traditional reader satisfaction, rather than simply fail to produce such satisfaction through incompetence. Though his book may leave us admiring his theories, theory is not fiction.

Anne Tyler's *A Spool of Blue Thread* provides a nice contrast, though it is hardly an R&R novel. As the wife and mother at the center of the multi-generational plot, Abby Whitshank compares herself with her husband: "Maybe the reason he'd forgotten [a certain anecdote] was that he took their

happiness for granted. He didn't fret about it. Whereas Abby . . . oh, she fretted, all right. She couldn't bear to think that their family was just another muddled, discontented, *ordinary* family."

This is an important point. It tells us that Abby (like other Whitshanks, but more so) is committed to the theory of Whitshank exceptionalism; they exist to a large extent in their own stories of Whitshank unusualness, their own somewhat falsified family chronicle. Abby is the one who devotes the most effort to this. As the narrator says, she frets, and she *curates* the Whitshank family happiness, in an often overbearing way.

Some readers and reviewers will also find the family to which Tyler has devoted this book too muddled, too discontented, too ordinary—too much like the families Tyler has been writing about in what is now a fifty-year career comprising twenty novels. Here is a family with four children, two girls and two boys (one of whom is adopted), and the usual problems that come with age—Abby becomes mentally unstable and husband Red has a bad heart. Tyler's gift is to make this ordinary family interesting, engrossing, moving, funny, and sad. There are revelations that take us beyond the ordinary middle-class family life of Baltimore—the founding narrative of the Whitshank family and its home is strange, even kinky—but it's a story that could happen to anyone. One of the adult children is less reliable than his siblings, and they all feel shortchanged. The novel revolves around social occasions, arguments, meals, and minor adjustments. Unlike Tom McCarthy, Tyler doesn't discuss the making of meaning; she simply makes meaningful fiction, in a traditional but masterful vein.

Chigozie Obioma, a twenty-eight-year-old Nigerian, is an example of one of the indirect forms of American hegemony that bother some Booker observers. Nigerian-born, he was mostly educated in the U.S., with an MFA from the University of Michigan, and is now on the faculty at the University of Nebraska. Marlon James has a master's degree in Creative Writing from an American university and teaches at Macalaster College. NoViolet Bulawayo, short-listed Zimbabwean from 2013, has an MFA from Cornell and is a Stegner fellow at Stanford; her fellow nominee Jhumpa Lahiri has an MFA and Ph.D. from Boston University and teaches at Princeton. There is some truth to the accusation that, whatever their countries of birth, many of the "Empire writes back" candidates for the Booker are citizens of modern American MFA culture.

There is of course a strong recent tradition in Nigerian writing, stimulated in part by the example of Chinua Achebe and often revolving around the painful years of the Biafran revolt. Obioma's book, *The Fisherman*, also has a political dimension, and there are Igbo-Yoruba-Hausa frictions, though it takes place in the 1990s, when the popular politician MKO Abiola apparently won the popular election but was jailed by the military dictator General Abacha. The middle-class family at the center of the book holds high hopes for Abiola and these are among many hopes that are destroyed in this family tale.

The narrator is Benjamin. His father is a banker who has high ambitions for his four sons, wanting them to "dip their hands into rivers, seas, oceans of this life and become successful: doctors, pilots, professors, lawyers." When the father is transferred to a faraway town and becomes a remote presence in the family's life, things fall apart. Disobeying their mother, the boys begin going to the nearby river, becoming the titular fishermen. A neighbor spots them there one day; much more consequentially, they encounter there a local madman and sexual exhibitionist who calls the oldest, Ikenna, by name and prophesies that he will be killed by one of his own brothers.

Around this curse circle the further events of the novel. The mother becomes mentally unstable, requiring the father to return; Ikenna distances himself from his brothers, who continue to love him and resist (naturally) any suggestion that they are going to kill him. Benjamin, who alternates between an adult's and a child's tone and freedoms in his narration, recounts further horrors which are relieved by an escape to Canada.

Obioma's book was summed up by one reviewer as "an elegy to lost promise, to a golden age squandered, and yet it remains hopeful about the redemptive possibilities of a new generation." A more mixed review praised the book's "vitality, profusion and abundance," while suggesting that this linguistic zest sometimes carries him away with metaphors and pompous diction. A strong dissent from a South African denounces the novel as overlong and overwritten (there is something to this charge), diagnosing its inclusion in the Booker short list as political: "they had to fish out an African." This is unjust. The mixture of writerly and speakerly discourses, the sense that what one is reading is an English version of something really spoken in Igbo, certainly gives the novel a different texture from most Anglo-American fictions, and that is rightly part of its appeal.

Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* is probably the saddest novel in this group, and that is saying a lot. It is a post-colonial novel focused primarily though not exclusively on the lot of desperate folk from the former colony (the Indian subcontinent in this case) making their way back to the former "mother country" for economic reasons. It is a story of immigration, yes, but even more a story of immiseration. Set mostly in the northern English city of Sheffield, it begins in a house where twelve laborers, none of them really entitled to be there, struggle to survive. They do backbreaking underpaid work in sewers and on building sites for criminal bosses who also control their access to housing. Of course they cannot complain, as there are more where they came from and their status deprives them of legal rights. There is some camaraderie among them but, in what seems a more grimly realistic depiction, mostly mistrust, ethnic discrimination, and theft.

The four central characters are Randeep and Avtar, middle-class Indians who have come to the UK to earn money and pursue a better life; Tarlochan (Tochi), a refugee whose arrival, in the back of a truck, is entirely illegal; and Narindar, a Sikh woman of bourgeois status, a legal resident in England.

She has made a fraudulent marriage with Randeep—he wants a visa, while she is motivated by something close to altruism. Avtar is initially a student, but almost immediately ceases his studies, as he needs money to send home to protect his family from ruthless loan sharks. Consequently he violates his own student visa status, and Randeep and Narindar narrowly escape detection by immigration officials. There are very few native-born English people in the novel—a university lecturer, other bureaucrats—which gives *The Year of the Runaways* a powerful feeling that we are reading about a fully alternative society, one that is in, but very much not of, Britain, hardly visible to wealthier, whiter residents.

The lives of the three men are grim and apparently hopeless: their dreams of getting established, of returning home comfortable and successful, of helping their families, come to nothing. Yet the scenes set in India show why these men were desperate to escape. The most awful have to do with Tochi, whose family has been murdered over a minor slight because they are Chamars, a caste considered subhuman by wealthy landowners.

Sahota gives each of the four main characters a novella-length chapter. The plot is driven on as they unpredictably interact, intercutting the Sheffield scenes with episodes from India. There is a final chapter set ten years later, with bittersweet updates, showing some of the characters partially relieved from their misery. It seems perfunctory and could well have been removed. Salman Rushdie, doing his part for younger, unknown novelists, is quoted on the cover—"All you can do is surrender, happily, to its power." Reviewers, though not quite so unrestrained, generally praised the book. Kamila Shamsie in the *Guardian* concludes, "Sahota moves some of the most urgent political questions of the day away from rhetorical posturing and contested statistics into the realm of humanity." Lucy Daniel writes, "without flights of fancy, neither sensationalizing nor preachy, its greatest asset is that it doesn't oversimplify." I agree, and would have approved entirely if "Mr. Smith" had been right and Sahota won the Booker. His novel is, as Shamsie calls it, "brilliant and beautiful."

Hanya Yanagihari's *A Little Life* has received praise at least as extravagant, having been dubbed, for instance, "the great gay novel" by the *Atlantic*'s reviewer (an unhistorical judgment, certainly, in the context of the Booker, which was given in 2004 to Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, in which gay love is not only more central but more "normal").

A Little Life is really two books intertwined. One is the story of what happened over the years to four college suitemates who moved to New York. Reviewers compare it to Mary McCarthy's *The Group*; one might also think of David Lodge's *How Far Can You Go?* What is astonishing about Yanagihara's central four is how incredibly successful they all are. When the novel begins, one is a waiter wanting to be an actor, and another is an artist working in a lowly position at a magazine. By the later pages of the novel, which seems to cover about thirty-five years but is oddly unstuck in time, the artist,

JB, is world-famous and rich; the architect, Malcolm, is world-famous and rich; the actor, Willem, is probably the most world-famous and rich; and Jude, the litigator, is widely acclaimed, at least in legal circles, and rich. They live in a world of summers in Europe, casual trips to Bhutan, flats in London, architect-designed retreats in Connecticut.

Yanagihara is moderately interesting on Manhattan life. It's true, as many readers have pointed out, that the relentless focus on private life with hardly an acknowledgement of any public event (presidential elections, 9/11, etc.) means that these men live their entire adult lives in a sort of eternal present. But there are details about restaurants and flats and the theater that give something of the effect of reading the *New Yorker*'s "Talk of the Town" while living in Mississippi. These men live enviable lives, even if little explanation of how they achieved them is available.

But the other story, which is dramatically at odds with what seems a Balzacian view of how ambitious young men take the city, is about Jude, who figures increasingly as the main character (JB and Malcolm fade into insignificance and occasional walk-on appearances). From the beginning Jude is mysterious: his roommates have never seen his body, which has unexplained pains and apparent deformities along with a limp, and nobody knows anything about his history; his sexual interests are likewise a blank. He is a brilliant mathematician and a concert-quality singer who attends Harvard Law School after graduation and also earns a master's degree in math.

From the beginning there are tantalizing hints of a troubled background. It is revealed in bits and pieces and, when finally more or less complete, consists of this: Jude was a foundling left in a dumpster. Taken into a monastery, he was beaten and raped by the monks. One, Brother Luke, won him over by kindness and eventually took him away, promising they would go live on a farm, but instead turned him into a boy prostitute at a series of motels in the western U.S. Rescued from this life, he was then abused some more by counselors, then by a doctor in Philadelphia, who deliberately ran over him, causing the troubles in his legs and back. In part to reassert control over his own body, he has a serious self-harm habit, routinely cutting his arms with razor blades in a vividly described process. For a very long time his only sexual relationship is with a man who beats him up and eventually throws him down a flight of stairs. In the Catholic tradition Saint Jude is the patron saint of lost causes, and Jude's name is well chosen, though Job might have worked even better.

Jude understandably feels shame about his past. What is remarkable is how cherished he is in his present. He attends an unnamed college (Bard has been suggested as a model) on a full scholarship and dazzles all with his intelligence, though it is a little hard to understand how a life as a peripatetic rent boy provided him with such intellectual gifts. His three suitemates, particularly Willem, do all in their power to care for him; his law school professor adopts him; he has a doctor, more or less on twenty-four-hour call

for when his cutting is too extreme or he is otherwise ill. And he *is* quite ill, becoming more and more immobile, eventually having his legs amputated. He is fantastically successful as an attorney and treasured by his firm, though he is clearly a difficult companion. The cutting never stops.

The strongest relationship is with Willem, who, having loved Jude since college, eventually begins a homosexual relationship with him. Naturally, then, Willem is killed in an accident.

The parade of horrors often seems too much to take, though the length of the book means that they are somewhat diluted by non-horrible life events, Jude's worldly success, and the love of his friends and adoptive parents. *A Little Life* has been very widely praised. Jon Michaud, writing in the *New Yorker*, referred to its "subversive brilliance," explaining that it is subversive because it refuses to offer redemption and implying that it is brilliant because the "graphic depictions of abuse and physical suffering that one finds in 'A Little Life' are rare in mainstream literary fiction." He claims it "can drive you mad, consume you, and take over your life"—in a good way, presumably. The notion that it is a great gay novel seems to ignore the novel's failure to acknowledge any moments in history—the AIDS crisis, for instance, or gay marriage—and even more by the fact that homosexuality is linked so strongly with pedophilia and sadism. Even the relationship between Jude and Willem is hardly sexual—Willem thinks of himself as gay only for Jude, continuing to have affairs with women. Ester Bloom called it "as stunning and well-constructed as a cathedral," while others have objected to the teasing, slow, melodramatic drip of Jude's back-story.

The strongest challenge to the book came from Daniel Mendelsohn, in a long article in the *New York Review of Books*. Yanagihara's real subject, he declares, is "abjection." Mendelsohn mentions its "mad hyperbole," he objects to its curious reticence about the actual details of gay men's lives, and he criticizes the prose for "oscillating between the incoherently ungrammatical . . . and painfully strained attempts at 'lyrical' effects." He even put his finger on the central "problem with Jude . . . that, from the start, he's a pill: you never care enough about him to get emotionally involved in the first place, let alone affected by his demise." (Clearly many readers reacted differently and online comments frequently refer to the number of sodden tissues generated by Jude's plotline.) When Yanagihara's editor wrote in to defend the book, Mendelsohn doubled down—"the preposterous excess of humiliation and suffering heaped on the protagonist by its author (along with the character's improbable array of compensatory expertises) both defies verisimilitude and alienates the sensible reader." He goes on to describe the book as dishonest, a work which dupes the reader into tears.

This is an extreme reaction, to be sure, but it is fair critical practice to ask: "if I am to invest the time to read a book of 720 pages, will I receive a commensurate reward for my time?" To me, *A Little Life* fails the cost-benefit test.

Which brings us to *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. That it won the Man

Booker Prize is entirely defensible. If *A Little Life* is curiously insulated from history, *Brief History* is firmly planted in it. Each of its sections is precisely dated and, though some of the events are given fictional makeovers—most importantly, the attempted murder of Bob Marley is changed a bit, and Marley is referred to as "The Singer"—the narrative bristles with authority (the four researchers thanked in the acknowledgments help explain this grounding). In the same passage James says that he set out to write a novel "driven by nothing but voice." In this he is entirely successful. The book is divided into five sections; within the first four the narration is shared among different characters in relatively short chapters named for them. For instance, the first belongs to Sir Arthur George Jennings, a white former Governor-General, whose distinction is that he is already dead (though in later chapters speakers will narrate their own murders). Jennings speaks in standard English; the next chapter is voiced by Bam-Bam, a teenage gunman, and begins "*I know I was fourteen*. That me know." Like most of the Jamaican speakers, he uses a patois that is colorful and unforbidding, consisting mostly of a bit of slang, a lot of swearing, the irregular use of pronoun cases, and such oaths or intensifiers as "bombocloth" and "r'asscloth." There are also some proverbs, one of which James has used as an epigraph: "If it no go so, it go near so." I take this to be a pronouncement on his use of real life for fictional purposes.

There are a few narrators who are not members of criminal gangs: Jennings, for instance; Alex Pierce, a reporter for *Rolling Stone* who comes to Jamaica to cover a visit by Mick Jagger and gets caught up in events surrounding the attempted murder of "The Singer"; and Barry DiFlorio, a CIA agent who gives strong evidence of American meddling in Jamaican politics. The Cold War, still motivating U.S. policy in 1975, dictates alliances, with the local parties and gangs opposed to Socialist Prime Minister Michael Manley, and some of the guns used by the posses are provided by the Americans. The most interesting voice is that of Nina Burgess, who begins as a fascinated semi-groupie haunting the home of The Singer, and who is fortuitously present when armed men come in, guns blazing, but fail to kill anybody. Aware she has been spotted, she moves from one place to another, and changes her name, her job, and her country, but is aware that she can never escape the menace unleashed in Kingston.

The rest of the speakers belong to one or another of the various gangs that divide Kingston. The main two occupy Copenhagen City and the Eight Lanes and are led by the "dons" Papa-Lo and Shotta Sherriff. Events get away from them, especially when, having met in jail, they form a peace movement that does not suit their followers, the CIA, or the politicians. Their successors are more ruthless, particularly the psychopathic Josey Wales who, along with Weeper and youths like Bam-Bam and Demus, continues to threaten, rape, and kill. Rape is omnipresent and almost unnoticed; sexual violence against the boys and men, presumably in an effort to shame and degrade, is

just as common. And it's worth noticing that the police and the army are as ruthless, amoral, violent, and corrupt as those officially outside the law. The Rasta term "Babylon" applies to anyone official.

The plot is organized, at first, around the assault on The Singer, who is suspected by each gang and each political party of being too close to the other, has an ill-understood commitment to Rastafarianism, and is due to mount a Peace Concert. He survives his shooting, gives the concert, but goes to live in England, as Bob Marley did. The first two chapters take place on the day before and the day of the shooting. The third is four years later, still in Kingston, after the election and its aftermath, and shows a further descent into violence. The fourth is set in America, where the drug business has taken the Jamaicans from Copenhagen City to Miami and the Bronx.

What is *Seven Killings* about? Well, first, it's about more than seven killings—nearer a hundred—but "Seven Killings" is the title of an article Alex Pierce is writing for the *New Yorker*. Alex Pierce, an American journalist writing for the *New Yorker*, becomes compromised in the incessant violence. He commits a murder; later he is required to change his article by Eubie—more cold-blooded than ever—who shoots him, then, to his complaint, replies, "Twelve-year-old boy get shot in Jamaica all the time and they don't bawl like a bitch." The impression this book leaves is that Eubie is not exaggerating. If it has one overall theme it is the inescapability of violence. Readers can see, around the edges of the riveting central events, some sociologically inflected "explanations": grinding poverty; a toxic projection of masculinity; interference by outside geopolitical forces; drugs, including the movement from hemp to heroin to cocaine to crack cocaine. But James seems most interested in, and skilled at, what it *feels like* to inflict and to experience violence, and how hopelessness is inscribed on the lives and consciousness of people. I suppose Michael Wood was right, to this extent—it's a portrait of where some people are, and my reaction, not unmixed with relief that it is not where *I* am, was to be gripped and moved by an impressive novelist.