

BOOKS

Marlon James on Winning the Man Booker Prize, Fictionalizing Bob Marley, and Why He Loves Kendrick Lamar

BY ALEX FRANK

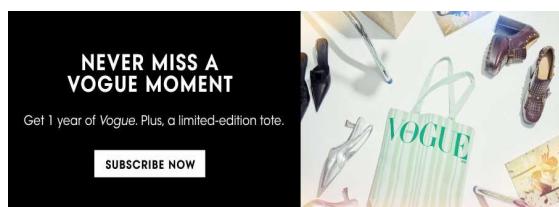
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SAVE

Marlon James won the Man Booker Prize for Fiction this month for *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, making him the first Jamaican author to take home the U.K.'s most prestigious literary award. The novel has the words *tour de force* printed on its cover (a quote from an admiring critic), and it very much lives up to that description. James reimagines the real-life assassination attempt on Bob Marley through a group of characters who are involved in or affected by the crime. Over some 700 binge-readable pages, we cycle through the psyches of gangsters, journalists, ghosts, antiheroes, and a gay gunslinger named Weeper.

Marley, referred to only as "The Singer" and never made a narrator, comes alive through the eyes of James's characters, as a performer, a political figure, and the wielder of powerful symbolic status in Jamaica. Part fact, part fiction, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is a coiled swirl of corruption, political upheaval, drug use, violence, and irresistible Jamaican patois. James recently spoke with Vogue.com about writing the novel, that other Caribbean superstar (Rihanna), and his widely read essay about growing up gay in Jamaica.



I heard that you didn't even write an acceptance speech, you were so sure you wouldn't win.

That is true. I believed the press and the press had said that Hanya Yanagihara was the favorite. It was also my way of dealing with the stress of an awards show. Even when you're telling yourself you're chill, it's high stress. When I got to the ceremony, I did write a list of people to thank. Because I thought, if I do win, I don't want to be that guy—the rambling, incoherent guy.

How do you think your win has been received in Jamaica?

I know that it made the front page of both newspapers. I heard the prime minister mentioned it in her address to parliament. I think people all over have been really

celebrating it even when they're not quite sure what it is. They know it's a big deal. I don't think a lot of people who are celebrating it have read the book. They'll probably read the book now and say, "What the hell am I celebrating?" But I also think a lot of people who have read the book have the sense that it's time that we talk about all of this stuff: Our history of post-colonialism, the failure of independence, economic problems, gun violence, drugs, extortion, how much our politics is linked to violence.

Were you nervous about going into this territory—exploring the darker side of Jamaican politics—or is that exciting for a writer?

It's not mutually exclusive. Certainly not for me. Pretty much everything I've written is a mix of excitement and fear. For this one, there were parts of me going, "Yeah, I'm writing about some pretty troubling parts of Jamaican history that some people may not want talked about." There were parts of me that thought, Is this going too far? Is this going to wake up some gunman somewhere? But most of the men I wrote about are dead. And it was something I had to move beyond, this fear. Especially when I realized that some of that fear is irrational, this worrying about being attacked by ghosts.

As a fiction writer, you have to be true to the story, but I also took some sort of refuge in the fact that I was making it up. I wasn't reporting that this is the gospel. Someone recently sent me a letter and he said, "I know you hate when people try and match your characters to real life," however, he sent me an entire list of all the real-life people he thinks these characters are based on. There's one he couldn't get and he asked me if I could kindly tell him who that is. And I'm never going to tell him.

What was your entry point into thinking about the assassination of Bob Marley?

The first thought was an article I read in 1991 that Timothy White wrote for *Spin*. It was an update of his biography, and that was the first time I know of that anybody was talking about the actual assassination attempt and who actually tried to kill him and where these people ended up. I was fascinated from that point, because even with all he knew, it still ended up being a mystery. The fiction writer in me likes gaps in stories because I can jump into that gap and try to suggest something. Back then, I wasn't a novelist, but I was always inspired by the parts of stories that are unexplainable, or the part in the conversation where people stop talking. In Jamaica, especially when you're talking about things close to the bone, it comes to a point where the conversation

drifts off and ends because you don't want to go into that territory. And this was an article that went into that territory.

What was the research process like?

I had three or four assistant researchers. For the historical details, it was about getting a bigger sense of the Cold War, CIA involvement, the minute-by-minute details of the assassination attempt. But a lot of the research was peripheral. It was stuff like '70s slang. How people spoke. Which decade did people say "gnarly"? I was trying to build an entire universe, so the research would be far and wide. Everything from, like, if burning the bra was a movement, would my character be wearing a bra? I can't have my character whip out Jif peanut butter if Jif peanut butter hadn't been invented yet. I want to know if Paper Mate pens were around. That's the type of stuff I research.

As a writer yourself, what do you make of Bob Marley as a songwriter?

My favorite Bob Marley songs—and one I mention near the end of the book, “Buffalo Soldier”—show just how sly he is. We're not big on irony in Jamaica, sarcasm and double-talk. We tend to say things plainly, sometimes to the point of boredom. A lot of his songs, like “We and Dem,” have these double meanings, which is really, really great. “Kinky Reggae,” which is straight-up sexual abandon—Jamaicans, we are sort of moralizing and moralistic and also very earnest, not very big on irony. And he was sometimes pretty big on that. “We and Dem” foretold all these uptown rich hypocrites loving him years before they did. That's what jumped out to me more than anything else—he was the wittiest. He was wise enough that even when he wrote about his own assassination attempt in this song “Ambush in the Night,” he starts off painting the social and cultural background of Jamaica so completely and so nailed the suffering and desperation of the average Jamaican, that he makes his assassination attempt seem inevitable.

You were not a fan of his growing up, though, right?

Not really. It's different when you grow up in reggae. If reggae comes from another country, you can have the relationship to reggae that I have to rock. But it's something I grew up with. It's probably something I appreciate more now. In the '80s, I was all about New Wave and synth pop—New Order and Depeche Mode and Eurythmics and Michael Jackson and tons and tons and tons of Prince. I was into hard rock and

heavy metal—AC/DC and Led Zeppelin and the Cult. I was self-conscious about becoming a Jamaican cliché. People would ask me about reggae, and I'd say, "I don't ask you about rock just because you're an American."

You flip through so many vernaculars and patois and mind frames in the book. How were you able to code-switch so seamlessly between different characters?

It got so crazy that the way I got through it was that I drew a chart on the wall with each character and what happened to them. Plot charts. Rows and columns. Each column was a different character, each row a different time of day, so I knew what everybody was doing at a certain time of day even if they weren't in the story at that point. At this point, these characters became living, breathing people. I needed to know where they were even in the off time. Are they in bed right now? What is everybody doing at 2:00 p.m.?

I want to ask you about the piece you wrote for the *Times* in which you describe leaving Jamaica so you could more fully step into your gay life. Is it hard to focus your literary attention on a place that you felt you needed to, in some ways, abandon?

Yeah, but that's part of it. I can't write about something that I don't have complicated feelings about. Half of my writing is figuring that out. One of the complicated things about Jamaica is it's not like I narrowly escaped death by running away. All of my struggles were so deeply internal that a lot of people didn't even know I was going through it. But at the same time, leaving Jamaica did free up a lot of that book—particularly the second half of that book, which I don't think I could have written in Jamaica. The explicit sex, certainly. In the realm of Jamaican macho archetypes, the gunman sits at number one, sits at the top, so a gunman like Weeper who is not just gay but a bottom? All the people who are now going to read the book because it won the Booker Prize are going to be screaming obscenities when they get to that scene. Then I'll know if I can go back to Jamaica or not.

What I was going through was far more insidious. It would be far more simple if I was escaping a mob. It's different when there is no mob but you're still scared. With me, I just kept building these walls and walls and walls around myself and I just didn't know who the hell I was. I told another reporter, to be persecuted for being gay in Jamaica, I would have had to be gay, wouldn't I? It's certainly not something I had admitted or explored—I'm sure a lot of people knew—but it wasn't something I explored. At one

point, I just ran to the church. So I became this big Bible-beating Christian for a few years to escape that, because I knew if I was seen as this devoted worshiper of the Lord, no one would ask, "Why doesn't he have a girlfriend?" because all my energy was going into Jesus. I was also protected by class. I lived on a posh street called Lady Musgrave Road. I would never have been on the front lines of Jamaican homophobia. But it's something that seeps on you like a cancer. I have friends who live in Jamaica and their lives are pretty uneventful and stable, but I still go, "Who are you kidding, though? You might not be on the street in downtown and somebody's about to beat you, but every single time you move to so much as hold your partner's hand, you have to make sure all the doors are locked. Make sure the shades are down, but are the shades translucent?" You go through all the rituals of secrecy to just be yourself. And I realized I just couldn't do that. And my conclusion for a long time was to simply not do it. Not be a person, not have a life, not have love, not express myself in any way that's even human. And if I keep this up, I'm going to be dead for real because I'm already kind of dead.

Have you been back to Jamaica since you wrote the article?

The last time I was in Jamaica was right before the book came out. Jamaica is celebrating the win, but I'm not exactly in the closet, so they have to deal with the complication of that. They can't have it easy. They have to deal with that. *The New York Times* gave me a prompt—voyage of the will—and I just wrote, and this is what came out. It will be interesting. There will be people who see beyond that, people who will try to just go, "Well, we'll just celebrate his accomplishments." And there will be people who will go, "All batty man fi dead." This is still a country where 20,000 people march in the streets to protest the repeal of the Buggery Law. It's going to be interesting. I might go there and have a wonderful time; I might go there and need security.

Some critics have compared you to David Foster Wallace.

That's great. I love David Foster Wallace. What we may have in common—I don't think we have a lot in common at all—is I didn't set out thinking, I'm going to push the boundaries of what is a novel. If anything, I did the reverse. I'm like, "I'm going to stop thinking about the novel and just write and go wherever feels right at the time." And I have a feeling that's how he wrote as well. There are a lot of people who write metafiction, but they don't have his humanity. And you can't come to that if you start out thinking, I'm going to break the rules of fiction here. No. You just go, "There's a

story in my head and I want it to come out the way it is in my head.” I had to tear down everything, including what I thought a novel is. If you keep the humanity of the novel intact, you can make all sorts of jumps with it. Being interested in people. But I have a feeling that we get compared because we both wrote kind of risky, unconventional big books.

HBO is adapting the book for a television series. Who should play Bob?

Oh, my God, I don’t know. [His son] Rohan Marley could do it. But I have a clearer idea of who I want to play Josey Wales.

And who would that be?

Idris Elba. Who else? He could nail it, but he probably doesn’t want to play yet another crime lord. But in terms of bringing that deeply coiled, ready-to-strike charisma that Josey Wales has, he’d be perfect.

What contemporary Jamaican fiction should we be reading?

It would be too narrow to just go Jamaican. Jamaican—there’s Roland Watson-Grant. Naomi Jackson just did a fantastic book—she’s from Barbados. Ishion Hutchinson is a fantastic poet. Kei Miller is another poet and novelist. Claudia Rankine, who pretty much had the most-talked-about book last year with *Citizen*. Sharon Miller in Trinidad. There’s so much going on. These writers are bringing new perspectives. We used to think all these writers write reactions to how they feel about England. And a lot of these are how you feel about graffiti and breakdancing and reggae and soca and homosexuality and TV.

You’re obviously a massive music fan. What are you listening to?

The newest Kendrick. The new Vince Staples, which I really, really love. I secretly like it more than the Kendrick Lamar, but I know that’s heresy in some circles. I like Father John Misty. I usually have no patience for what I call the hairy white boy choirs—Fleet Foxes, Bon Iver, and all that. I can’t handle that music. But he’s so convinced that he’s writing bedroom booty music that I kind of believe it, too. I love the new New Order. I’m really digging the new Miguel. He’s as close as we’re going to get to Prince.

What do you like about Kendrick and Vince Staples?

I like Kendrick in the way he just relentlessly demolishes hip-hop formula and builds it back up. I’m not that crazy about some of his bootstrapping lyrics, but I love just the ambition of it. The only place you’ll find that kind of ambition is something like

[Radiohead's] *Kid A*. Vince Staples I like for almost totally different reasons, because his view is so internal. It's one of the bleakest hip-hop records I've ever heard. It's almost as if Aphex Twin produced a hip-hop record. I love beats and I love flow, and no one is matching Vince Staples this year.

Are you a Nicki Minaj fan?

I like the idea of Nicki Minaj. But my favorite Nicki Minaj song is still "Monster," and that's really Kanye's song.

Nicki from Trinidad and Rihanna from Barbados are pretty much the biggest Caribbean ambassadors to the world.

I love RiRi to death. I love Rihanna. Every time she does something edgy, I'm like, "Yes." When I saw "Bitch Better Have My Money," I was like, "Yes, this is exactly how it should be." I was like, "Now I'm going to hear the usually white feminists be outraged." I'm like, "You guys weren't outraged with that stupid Lily Allen video."

Seems like you find the time to read the music think pieces.

It's why my book took so damn long. I do read them, usually to get outraged by them—"Oh, listen to this jackass." I'm fascinated by Nicki Minaj and Azealia Banks if for no other reason that it wasn't that long ago that successful black women were told to keep their mouths shut to stay successful. What is Diana Ross's view on politics? We don't know. And I'm pretty sure she had some strong feelings about it—Diana Ross is no one's fool. But you don't want to run the risk of being the angry black woman.

Who do you read that makes you want to be a better writer?

I do sometimes look at other writers as competition and think, I need to step my game up. I read James Ellroy and think that. David Foster Wallace and think that. Zadie Smith and think that. Salman Rushdie and think that. Don DeLillo and think that. But that just makes me want to rush to the desk and write.

People have been calling your book the "Great Jamaican Novel." What do you make of that?

I think it's bullshit. It's a horrible thing to strive for. I think it's such a fake and false thing to strive for. That's not to say you can't have huge ambition. I'm a really, really, really ambitious writer. 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.

This interview has been condensed and edited.



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