



AUTHOR INTERVIEWS

A 'Post-Post-Colonial' Take On The Violent Birth Of Modern Jamaica

OCTOBER 5, 2014 · 5:36 PM ET

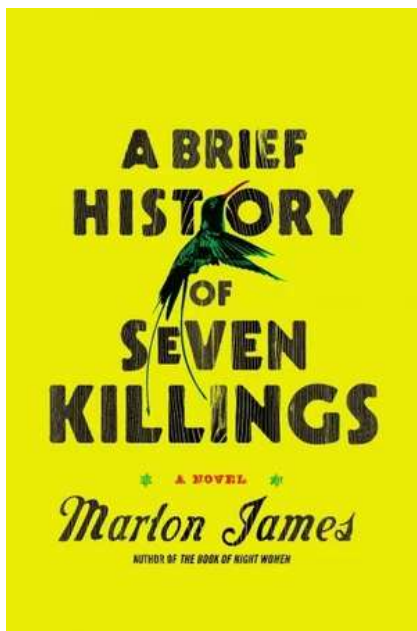
HEARD ON ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

By NPR Staff

6-Minute Listen

PLAYLIST Download

Transcript



A Brief History of Seven Killings

By Marlon James

PURCHASE

Born in Jamaica in 1970, the novelist Marlon James had a front-row seat to the violence and unrest that ruled the country for decades. Though he had a middle-class suburban upbringing, his parents were police: his mother a police detective, his father a policeman and later a lawyer. It was nearly impossible to escape the gun violence, gang warfare and corrupt politics that dominated the island, James tells NPR's Arun Rath.

"The last thing the prime minister said in response to ... the crime going out of control, and the economy sort of going in the toilet, was that, 'There are five flights to Miami a day. So anyone who wants to skip the country can do so.' "

In the midst of all that turmoil, a growing international audience had turned on to Jamaican reggae music and its biggest star, Bob Marley.

In the months leading up to the general election in December 1976, Marley and others set up a free Peace Concert, hoping to ease the tension and violence in Kingston.

"Two days before the concert, these gunmen, around seven or eight, burst into Bob Marley's house on Hope Road, machine guns blazing," James recounts. "They shot nearly everybody. Bob Marley got shot in the chest and the arm. His wife got shot in the head. Miraculously, everybody survived."

That's the real-life event that sets in motion the plot of James' new novel, *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. The novel starts in Kingston, following as many as 15 different narrators as their lives intertwine in the crime-ridden city. The perspectives range from young gang members to CIA operatives to a writer for *Rolling Stone*.

As for the title of the book, *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, don't be fooled: The book is not brief, and many more than seven people die. James says that the book's central narrative follows seven of Marley's would-be killers after their assassination attempt.

"It's funny," he says. "This is the loosest novel I've ever written ... but I did stop as soon as killing No. 7 happened. It just took me 700 pages."

Click the audio link above to hear the full conversation, which includes a reading from the book in Jamaican patois about the role of guns in the lives of the young gang members.





Marlon James' previous books include *The Book of Night Women* and *John Crow's Devil*.

Jeffrey Skemp/Courtesy of Riverhead Books

Interview Highlights

On how the violence and turmoil led to the emergence of modern Jamaica

It's also important to know that part of that was also good. It wasn't all a nightmare. In fact, some incredibly progressive things came out of that time. It was also the time when reggae started to become a huge commercial force. And because of that, a lot of young people who would never have had opportunities otherwise went into music. It was also a really vital period and a very successful period for the Jamaican middle class.

So there was a lot of good that was happening in the '70s. There was just so much bad. And it was just so bloody, and the stakes were so high, and the gunmen were running certainly west Kingston, bringing it to its knees. And politicians got involved because whoever won Kingston won Jamaica. And they fed into it, and they gave these men guns, and they had them fight over turf. And it was pretty bloody. [In] 1980, over 800 people died.

On describing himself as "post-post-colonial"

"Post-post-colonial" — and that's just because I can't think of something wittier right now — I think is a new generation of, well, new-ish generation of writers, where we're not driven by our dialogue with the former mother country [the United Kingdom]. The hovering power for us when growing up in the '70s and '80s was not the U.K. It was the States, it was America. And it wasn't an imperialistic power, it was just a cultural influence. I'm sure if this book was written in the '70s or the '60s, the characters would have ended up in London. They wouldn't have ended up in the Bronx.

For us [as opposed to the post-colonial writers], for example, identity is not necessarily how to define ourselves in the relation of colonial power, colonial oppressor — so now it's a matter of defining who you are as opposed to who you're not.



Sign up for NPR's Up First newsletter.

The news you need to start your day. Nothing more, never less.

SUBSCRIBE

[See more subscription options](#)

By subscribing, you acknowledge and agree to NPR's [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).
NPR may share your name and email address with your NPR station. [See Details](#).

More Stories From NPR



FAMILY

The secret to lasting love? Sometimes it's OK to go to bed angry



AUTHOR INTERVIEWS

How the art world excludes you and what you can do about it



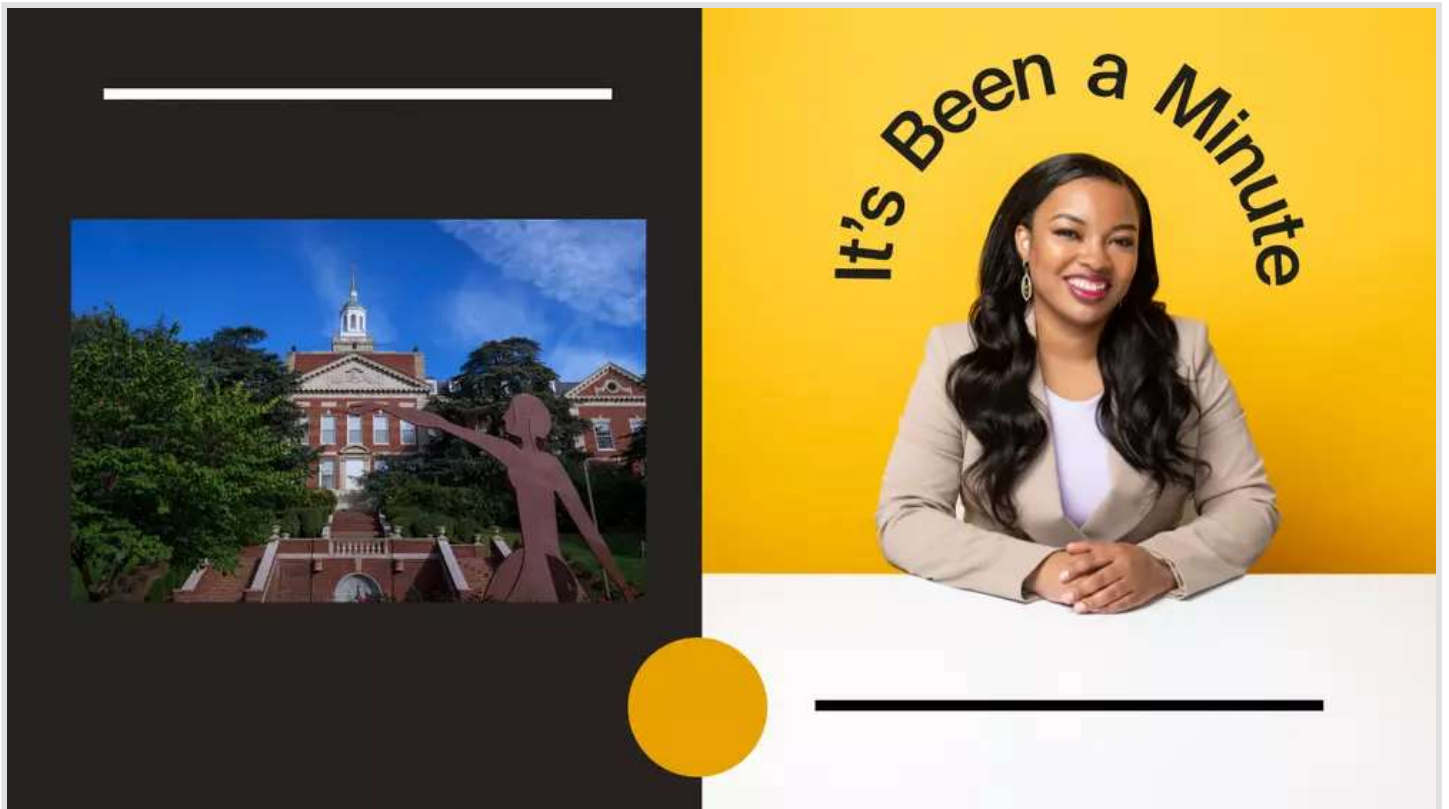
AUTHOR INTERVIEWS

A foster parent reflects on loving — and letting go of — the children in his care



AUTHOR INTERVIEWS

Police raided George Pelecanos' home. 15 years later, he's ready to write about it



BOOKS

Ayesha Rascoe on 'HBCU Made' — and some good old college memories



MENTAL HEALTH

What a Jim Crow-era asylum can teach us about mental health today

Popular on NPR.org



BUSINESS

Could vacant office spaces across the U.S. be the solution to a national problem?



CLIMATE

Reduce, reuse, redirect outrage: How plastic makers used recycling as a fig leaf



NATIONAL

The way a dying baby girl was cared for in 1980 helped shape her approach to nursing



NATIONAL
Kansas City shooting was not an act of terrorism or homegrown violence, say police



NATIONAL SECURITY
Russia is working on a weapon to destroy satellites but has not deployed one yet



NATIONAL
Hurricane Idalia shows nature may provide the best shoreline protection

NPR Editors' Picks



NATIONAL
Eyes on the road: Automated speed cameras get a fresh look as traffic deaths mount



ART & DESIGN

Thinking of getting inked? Advice from a veteran tattoo artist



LAW

See where the big Trump cases stand in the months leading to the election



MUSIC

Jennifer Lopez: Then and now



POLITICS

Toby Keith's 'Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue' lives on in MAGA country



MUSIC

Tiny Desk Premiere: Cinder Well

READ & LISTEN

Home

News

Culture

Music

Podcasts & Shows

CONNECT

Newsletters

Facebook

Instagram

Press

Public Editor

Corrections

Contact & Help

ABOUT NPR

Overview

Diversity

NPR Network

Accessibility

Ethics

GET INVOLVED

Support Public Radio

Sponsor NPR

NPR Careers

NPR Shop

NPR Events

[terms of use](#)

[privacy](#)

[your privacy choices](#)

[text only](#)

© 2024 npr