BOOK REVIEWS

* **EPIC BOOK**
  + “What most distinguishes” this novel “isn’t the outrages, but rather the odyssey.” (Domini, Washington Post)
  + “Devastating epic” (Boston Globe)
  + “A merciless, many-voiced epic, it is less a crime novel than a meditation on violence – on the way it feels to those who live it, and the way it spreads in the world.” (Lucas)
  + “Both intense and epic” (Kellogg)
  + “It’s epic in every sense of that word” (Kakutani)
  + “epic” (Freeman)
  + “Epic” (Hodges)
  + “Epic” (Hulbert)
  + “such passages reveal what this novel fundamentally is about: an epic of postcolonial fallout, in Jamaica and elsewhere, and America’s participation in that history. (Lazar)
* **VOICE**
  + “James’ ear for the way people speak and his eye for characteristic and telling gestures and behaviour lead to a rich, multi-textured prose, as voice follows voice that is far from straightforward, to say the least.” (Riemer, Trenchtown Rocks…)
  + “Together, these voices provide a Rashomon-style look at major events in Jamaica’s fraught history, including the attempted assassination of Marley and the lingering effects of Racism, sexism, and violence.” (Laura Pearson)
  + “It is driven by plot and voice, rather than what Elif Batuman mocks, as the “ideal of ‘craft’” – a cultish compulsion toward observation and detail that runs much contemporary fiction into ‘a nearly unreadable core of brisk verbs and vivid nouns.” The novel is a kind of social encyclopedia, its many voices a catalog of its place and time.” (Lucas)
  + “Bakhtin saw the novel as the genre of polyphony, incorporating and orchestrating several competing voices. James seems to take this philosophy to heart, even extending it, and so in *A Brief History of Seven Killings* we find a novel of cacophony. (Miller)
  + “You might take or leave the ingenuities of the plot, however, and concentrate instead on the testimonies that move that plot forward. As suspenseful as it is, the triumph of this novel is its voices.” (Genders)
* **CRITICISM**
  + Then a fundamental flaw or difficulty in James’ narrative strategy becomes all too evident. The novel lacks focus. For hundreds of pages, what seemed to be the core of James’ concern recedes to be replaced by an equally violent, dark set of narratives that come to rest eventually in the drug-ravaged Bronx of the 1980s. […] Yet this second half, as narrative voice replaces narrative voice, struck me as repetitive and self-indulgent – too much intrigue, too much mystification, by far too many words and too little imaginative connection with the splendid poise of the opening sections.” (Riemer, Trenchtown Rocks…)
  + “not enough of simply being allowed to see the world through a character’s eyes.” (Amis)
* **MISC. PRAISE**
  + “This novel should be required reading.” (PWxyz)
* **MANY READINGS AVAILABLE**
  + “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 Balano). Then there is the *roman clef* aspect, with at least one detailed review assiduously hunting down the parallels between James’ characters and actual players in the Jamaica of this period (Taylor 2015). I propose that, in the light of some of 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.” (Nanton)
  + “’Truth keep shifting,’ James explains by Skype, sitting at his desk in St. Paul, Minn. ‘Five, six stories, even contradictory stories, can exist at the same time and they’re kind of all true and all false. There is no one story.” (Kellogg)
* **GEOGRAPHY**
  + “Seven Killings is more like “Concrete Jungle” – a spiraling groove of crime and violence that reverberates from 1970s Kingston to 1990s Miami and New York.” (Lucas)
  + “Jungle” is a nickname for one of the many social housing developments that sprang up in Kingston in the 1960s and 1970s.” (Tayler)
  + “As you’d expect, the New York sections don’t have the panoramic ambitions of those set in Kingston. The crime plot becomes less an overview of the way a society works, or doesn’t work, and more a means of sustaining narrative interest while taking a look at the characters’ inner lives.” (Tayler)
  + “If you’re looking for 1970s Jamaica, you’re not going to find it in Jamaica,” he says dryly. “It’s changed too radically.” (Kellogg)
  + “James’s invented ghetto of Copenhagen City, where many of the book’s murders are plotted and take place, is worth a moment’s consideration. Through th ghetto’s name is an invention, it is reminiscent of actual places within the urban sprawl of Kingston, places such as Tel Aviv, Spain, Gaza, Angola – areas that exist within Jamaica but also refer to a wider world of conflict in which it participates. The names of some ghettos, such as Tivoli Gardens, seem especially ironic, with the inspiration of the original being so far removed from the killing field the place has become.” (Miller)
* **VIOLENCE**
  + “If *A Brief History of Seven Killings* can be said to have a main idea, it’s that nobody escapes, at least not entirely, from violence. Because violence isn’t an event, but a kind of potential – a force, like gravity, that lurks in every curve of space.” (Lucas)
  + “This eclecticism sometimes had the odd effect of distracting me from the courage of James’s book, which is after all an exploration of real-life acts of violence.” (Lazar)
  + “This violence isn’t gratuitously shocking. It’s shockingly real. James has set his novel in a fictional part of Kingston called Copenhagen, but many of the events have real-world equivalents. In May 1976, for instance, there was a huge tenement fire on Orange Lane in the Jamaican capital.” (Jordison, 3)
  + “This is a novel that explores the aesthetics of cacophony and also the aesthetics of violence.” (Miller)
* **CHARACTERS**
  + “Still, with all these layers, there are too many characters to keep track of, even with a list of dramatis personae that sprawls over four pages. A significant portion of them overlap in ways that slows this big beast of a novel to a crawl, and in his equal love for all his cast James misses an opportunity to allow the characters who do live and breathe a chance to develop more.” (Freeman)
  + “James elegantly keeps us following these internecine battles, but the book’s most memorable characters are the ones history would probably overlook. Chief among them is Bam-Bam, a gang member who witnesses his father and mother murdered in hideous fashion.” (Freeman)
* **GANGS**
  + “*A Brief History of Seven Killings* is based in part on the real-life story of the Shower Posse, who began their rise in early-60s Kingston and spread to America, where, by the 1980s, they controlled much of the crack trade in New York and Miami.”(Lazar)
  + “The second development was that certain Kingston ‘posses’ inevitably outgrew their political masters, went freelance and exploded into the cocaine trade on the US east coast – which is the setting for the second half of the novel.” (Amis)
* **HISTORY / ROMAN A CLEF**
  + “There is always too much history to keep track of – the daily news is itself an impossible barrage – and so a certain kind of novel has evolved to shape narratives out of such chaos, not to find answers, but to capture the way history feels, how it maims, bewilders, enmeshes us.” (Lazar)
  + “The characters are all freely imagined even when they’re filling the roles of real people, with the exception of Marley, who’s seen only through the eyes of a range of first-person narrators, and whose strange time is judiciously rationed.” (Tayler)
  + “The rest are gangster, and the bigger picture they open up is a view from the ground of the working relationship between organised crime and Jamaican parliamentary politics. Marley’s shooting is a good device for getting at that, because no one seriously disputes that it was triggered by the 1976 election campaign, then the most violent in the country’s history, contested by two sons of the light-skinned post-independence elite: Michael Manley, the leader of the social democratic People’s National Party, and Edward Seaga, the leader of the conservative Jamaica Labour Party. The Jamaican system of “garrisons” – social housing estates, usually built over bulldozed shantytowns, run by ‘dons’ on behalf of one or other of the parties – was up and running by the 1970s, with Tivoli Gardens, a pet project of Seaga’s and his electoral power base, as exhibit A. The novel reimagines it as ‘Copenhagen City,” perhaps to emphasize the contrast between the name’s promise of Scandinavian sleekness and the reality of votes delivered by armed enforcers.” (Tayler)
  + “James casts [Papa-Lo] as an enforcer of the old school, still capable of murdering a schoolboy when necessary but sick at heart and out of his depth in an increasingly vicious electoral struggle. Papa-Lo’s younger ally, who calls himself Josey Wales after the Clint Eastwood character (Lester Coke himself operated as “Jim Brown” in tribute to the only African American star of *The Dirty Dozen*), is better adapted to the shifting state of affairs.” (Tayler)
  + “Real events blur into the fictive continually in this novel.” (Genders)
* **MARLON JAMES**
  + “Thelwell still hoped that an affirmation of cultural identity that survived colonialism could form a bulwark against postcolonial political violence. But *A Brief History* is written from the other side of that hope’s failure. It is a post-postcolonial novel.” (Hodges)
  + Marlon James is part of generation of writers from Africa and the West Indies who arguably have more in common with each other than with their postcolonial, national foreparents . (Hodges)
* **DISAGREMENTS**
  + “Josey is made to seem dangerous not so much because he’s irretrievably damaged by previous rounds of slum clearance, gang warfare and police brutality – so is everyone around him – as because he attuned to goings-on in the wider world.” (Tayler)
* **READ MORE:** 
  + Police powers introduced by Manley’s government
  + Ed McCormack, Rolling Stones 1976
* **BOB MARLEY & ASSASSINATION**
  + “*Brief History* uses the story of the 1976 assassination attempt on Marley as a kind of trampoline, bouncing off that terrible event into a multilayered, choral inquiry into Jamaican politics and poverty, into race and class, and into the volatile relationship between the United States and the Caribbean.” (Kakutani)
  + “rather than run the risk of speaking for the reggae legend, James had everyone else speak about him instead.” (Jordison, 2)