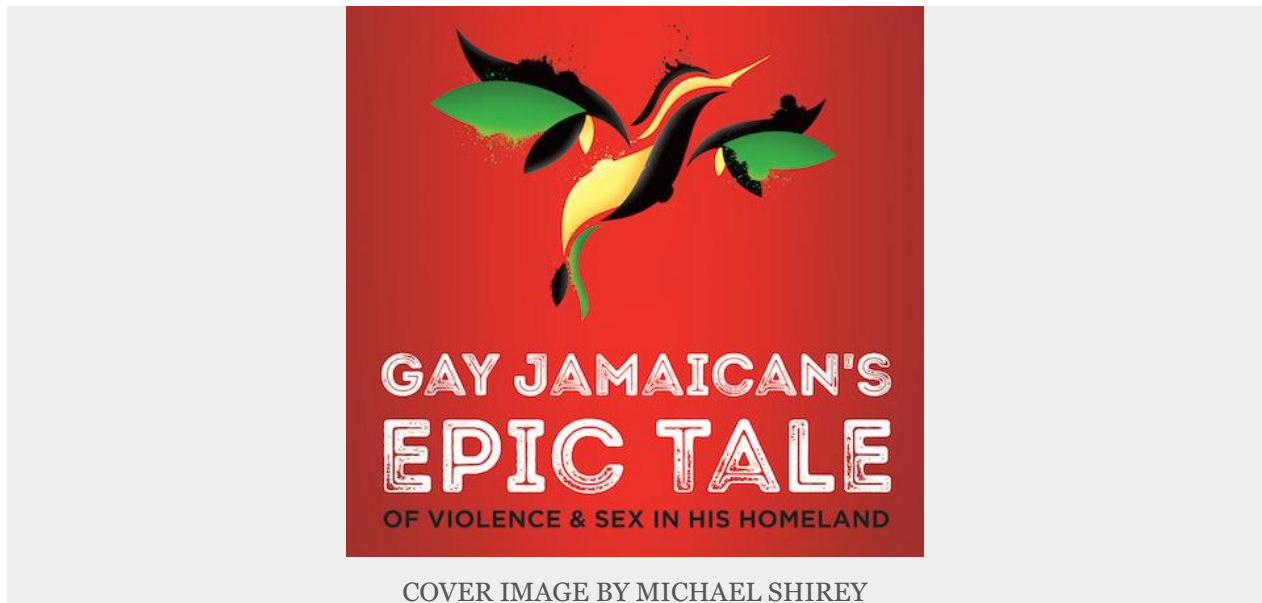


Gay Jamaican's Epic Tale of Violence & Sex in His Homeland

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BY GEORGE DE STEFANO | When Marlon James won Britain's prestigious Man Booker Prize for fiction in October, it came as a surprise to many — including the 44-year-old, out gay Jamaican author. James won for “A Brief History of Seven Killings,” a long, violent, sexually explicit, and altogether brilliant novel that takes off from the 1976 attempted assassination of reggae icon Bob Marley to encompass the CIA-backed destabilization of Jamaica during the latter years of the Cold War; political warfare in the ghettos of Kingston, the island's capital; the crack cocaine scourge of the '80s and early '90s; and sexuality — and particularly homosexuality.

Of recent fiction that I have read, the only books that for me compare to James' achievement are the Neapolitan novels of the (pseudonymous) Italian author Elena Ferrante. Both writers weave complex social tapestries that unfold over decades and span varied locales. The Jamaican and the Italian portray characters living in impoverished, violence-ridden communities who, oppressed by corrupt political and economic systems, experience the vicissitudes of history in their daily lives, in their flesh and bones. James and Ferrante also are postmodern traditionalists — masters of narrative who combine stylistic experimentation and great storytelling.

James is the first Jamaican author to win the Booker Prize, which Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, presented to him at a ceremony in London. (Nice irony there — a royal awarding one of the world’s major literary prizes to a native of one of the colonies the British empire had ruled and exploited.) He beat some tough competition; the finalists for the \$77,000 prize included the American novelist Anne Tyler. Besides being critically acclaimed, “A Brief History of Seven Killings” topped the bestseller lists in the UK and the US in hardcover; the paperback edition currently is in the New York Times top 10.

I recently spoke on the phone with James, who lives in Minneapolis (he moved there nearly nine years ago) and teaches writing at Macalester College in St. Paul. Our conversation covered the Booker prize, literary style, gay life in Jamaica, and the relationship between American and Jamaican gay activism, among other topics.

When James won the Booker for “A Brief History,” his third novel, he said he was surprised because he considered himself “not an easy writer to like.” How so?

“Well, the stories don’t necessarily end well,” James said. “The characters go into dark avenues, there’s a lot of violence. There also is a certain kind of inherently hopeful view a lot of people want from their fiction, which I just don’t deliver. I’m not interested in delivering it. It’s great when people understand or love it. But I don’t believe in making things easy for the reader, whether in terms of content or form. The only thing I owe the reader is a riveting story, while not necessarily making it easy.”



Novelist and Man Booker Prize winner Marlon James. | JEFFREY SKEMP

There is no single voice or point of view in the nearly 700-page novel. Different characters narrate the book’s chapters — ghetto gang leaders and their young henchmen, a CIA agent, a white rock journalist, a rebellious, middle-class Jamaican woman, a dead Jamaican politician. Although the novel is prismatic, it is not fractured; the chapters are linked by incident and theme and a narrative arc that carries the reader forward.

“I’m hugely inspired by Victorian novels,” James said. “That page-turning element and that sense of suspense are important to me, especially when I write something that is also kind of experimental. I still believe in that Dickens thing — make them laugh, make them cry, make them wait. It’s very important I don’t lose sight of that no matter how experimental I get.”

James originally intended “A Brief History of Seven Killings” to be a shorter crime novel but instead it became an epic.

“It changed,” he said, “because I started to really pay attention to the story. In a crime novel, in the really good ones, like James Elroy’s ‘American Tabloid,’ you realize that there are bigger things going on, a bigger story there. I started to open my eyes wider than I had before.

“Some people in Jamaica got guns to shoot Bob Marley. So, I ask, where did those guns come from, since these people can’t even afford food much less guns? And if I ask where the guns come from, I’m going to end up in politics, in CIA, in global conflicts, in the Cold War. It’s one thing to have a guy get shot, but where did those guns come from, where did those bullets come from? The longer I stared at the situation, the longer I gazed at the blood, the bigger it got.

“At one point, I wondered whether I bit off more than I could chew.”

James used researchers for the book. He said that although he gave them an open-ended mandate, he wasn’t looking for “stuff I already knew.”

He explained, “Having grown up in Jamaica in the ‘70s and ‘80s, a lot of what I wrote about I knew— I didn’t have to research it.”

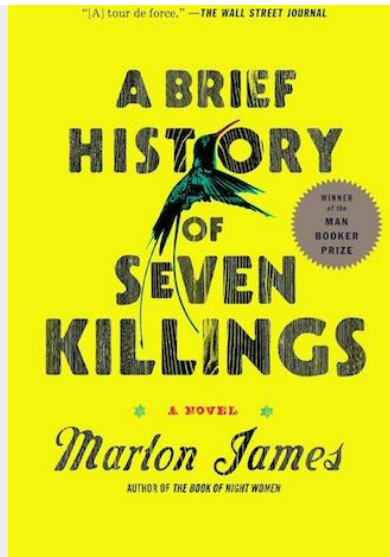
James, who was raised in a middle-class home in a Kingston suburb, said he had his researchers look for “trivial stuff — what brand of chewing gum would people have in 1976.”

“It’s not necessarily the big things that make a story authentic,” he said. “I think it’s the little things. You can have the most riveting narrative in the world. But the minutiae, the fine details that add resonance to scenes — getting that correct is crucial.”

“I did do a lot of research on the politics,” he continued. “I read all the books and all the material I could get on the Cold War, the CIA, economic destabilization, from different perspectives.”

Some of the novel’s characters are, or were, real people; others are fictional. How did James decide which would be which?

“One thing made it easy. Who did I know the most about? I knew the least about the guys who fired the actual shots [at Bob Marley], so pretty much all of them had to be fictitious. Some characters, like [gang leader] Josey Wales, are composite characters. Some came from my imagination. I don’t know if any of the gunmen were gay, but I think it complicates the story profoundly if one of them is.”



RIVERHEAD BOOKS

In the novel, the CIA and the right-wing, US-supported Jamaica Labour Party target Marley for assassination because they fear that he has aligned himself with the leftist government of Prime Minister Michael Manley, and, by extension, with Cuba and Communism. Among the hitmen who shoot up Marley's home (wounding him, his wife, and manager) is an ex-con gangbanger named Weeper. One of the novel's most compelling — and surprising— characters, Weeper had a sexual relationship with a fellow prisoner, and he does not hide it from his fellow thugs. Although he also has sex with women, he comes to realize that his heterosexual exploits are just him “trying to fuck the gay out” of himself.

Later in the novel, when he is living in New York and working for a Jamaican drug posse, Weeper, a hardened, macho killer, comes to accept not only that he is gay but also that he prefers being a bottom. This realization strikes him in a sexually explicit scene that, said James, some have criticized.

“People have asked why the explicit sex scenes, why do we need a sex scene of a finger up Weeper's ass? The reason it's necessary, why it couldn't be reported but had to be blow-by-blow, or literally stroke-by-stroke, is that it is only by fully giving over to the expression of his sexuality that he can come anywhere near to accepting himself. I'm not saying that fucking is the path to enlightenment, although it might be. But his gradual coming to accept himself happens through expressing himself sexually.”

Another memorable character is Alex Pierce, a Rolling Stone reporter on assignment in Jamaica. Pierce, said James, “tries to figure out Jamaica, and he fails.”

“But no one could succeed, because no Jamaican can figure out Jamaica. I still can't,” James said.

“Jamaica is super-progressive in one way and very retrogressive in another,” he continued. “There's so much creativity and yet every time you leave JA and come back, it's exactly as you left it. It can be a really thrilling but also really frustrating country to deal with.”

During our conversation, James had quite a bit to say about homosexuality and homophobia in his homeland. In a March 2015 New York Times article, he wrote, “Whether it was in a plane or a coffin, I knew I had to get out of Jamaica.” After he won the Booker, some media, including Britain’s Daily Mail, were “desperate to find information about me being a victim of some brutal attack by some anti-gay gestapo. Which didn’t happen.” He acknowledged, however, that while many Jamaicans, including family members, were thrilled by his success, “It’s not like there’s been an all-embracing acceptance of the gay guy who won the Booker Prize. Some people have been downright hostile.”

Although James hasn’t experienced it, violence against gay men, lesbians, and transgender people is all too common in Jamaica. But what is even more pervasive, he said, is a climate of fear. Even those who believe that being middle- or upper-class protects them from the worst abuse “still display their fears in subtle ways.”

“You’re having all your friends over and they’re all men,” he explained. “So let’s make sure the shades are drawn. But why? Heaven forbid that you should try to kiss someone in your own house. You have to make sure everything is closed and the gardener is gone. If the gardener becomes worthless and irresponsible on the job, make sure you keep him because if you fire him he’s going to come back with a mob and kill you.”

James drew a parallel between the fear gays have in Jamaica and his mother’s fear of crime.

“It adds up to a fear to be fully in your own skin,” he said. “She hasn’t been the victim of a violent attack, nobody’s tried to break in the house and rob her. She may very well live to the end of her life never having been robbed or anything like that. But the possibility is always there. And because of that she can never be fully at ease. I think it’s the same thing with being gay in Jamaica. Even if you never experience anything because you are protected by class, you will never be fully at ease.”

James criticized those Jamaicans who, though not homophobic themselves, “are not actually going to stick their necks out for anybody’s rights.” Anti-gay forces are far less inhibited. In addition to violent assaults, there have been political manifestations of bigotry, including mass rallies against revoking Jamaica’s colonial-era anti-sodomy laws. Jamaica’s twice-elected Prime Minister Portia Simpson-Miller made pro-gay comments during both of her campaigns, but the rhetoric has not informed policy or legislation.

Noting that American gay activists as well as international human rights organizations have spoken out against homophobia in Jamaica, James said that though foreign support for the nation’s LGBT community may be well-intended, “One of the problems we have sometimes is that it comes across as culturally superior.” And politically misguided, as with American gay activists’ calls in 2009 for a boycott of the Jamaican beer Red Stripe. The Jamaica Forum for Lesbians All-Sexuals and Gays (J-FLAG) criticized the boycott, noting that Red Stripe had committed itself to not supporting concerts and other events that featured homophobic reggae artists. “Jamaica’s deeply ingrained antipathy towards homosexuality and homosexuals is a social phenomenon that will not be undone by boycott campaigns or government dictate,” JFLAG stated. “It requires the painstaking effort of confronting the

society and talking to social actors who can bring change in the way society sees LGBT people.”

“One of major ways feminism stumbled,” James said, “was when it tried to export itself in the ‘70s and couldn’t get past its own sense of cultural imperialism — just be like me and you’ll be free, backward colored person. But you’re not going to get very far by insulting people.

“You have to allow people to define and liberate themselves in ways they feel liberated. You can’t force one view or one narrative, saying this is what being a gay citizen or a black citizen means and there’s one way to define it.”

James said that he visits Jamaica every year. His father, who shared his love of literature with Marlon (and to whom “A Brief History of Seven Killings” is dedicated), is dead, but his mother and sister still live there.

“For all its flaws, most of us still love our country quite a bit and you can’t necessarily sever that link,” he said. “I talk to Jamaican friends literally every day of the week on Facebook. A big part of who I am is Jamaican, and most of my sensibilities as a writer were shaped in Jamaica.”

What’s next for Marlon James?

He said that he is developing a pilot for an HBO series based on “A Brief History of Seven Killings.” He also is about to start his next novel, which will be set in Africa during the 11th and 12th centuries.

“Think, African ‘Game of Thrones,’” he laughed.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SEVEN KILLINGS | By Marlon James | [Riverhead Books](#) | \$30;
\$17, paperback | 704 pages