

Marlon James's "Dangerous" A Brief History of Seven Killings

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Jamaican writer Marlon James's third novel, *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, for which he won the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2015, is a crime novel which looks beyond the surface to explore and unearth suppressed histories. The genre itself, crime fiction, has proven to be prosperous ground to undertake such explorations. In *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, Lee Horsley asserts that simply "the act of looking at what has been hidden is in itself fraught with meaning" (2005: 203) and he further specifies that the detective or crime story is "an ideal form of exploration of suppressed realities. The investigative structure provides a ready-made instrument for unearthing the previously invisible crimes against people" (id.). In fact, James himself has described his novel as the act of the pulling off a stitch that might "disrupt the whole fabric" (James 2015).

Similarly, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* could also be deemed "dangerous" in Edwidge Danticat's terms. In her work *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, Danticat argues that dangerous writing is that writing which is passionate, fearless and involves exposing submerged memories. In this way, the writer has no other choice but to create as a revolutionary act that breaks with the silences, and in so doing, both the writing and reading become dangerous undertakings. Danticat explains that to create dangerously is "to create fearlessly, boldly embracing the public and private terrors that would silence us, then bravely moving forward even when it feels as though we are chasing or being chased by ghosts" (2010: 148). In this sense, the novel seeks to come to terms with some episodes of the recent past in Jamaica which have been mostly overlooked and silenced. Ghosts are very present right from the beginning, and they too take the duty of exposing untold stories, so much so that the novel opens with the statement "Listen. Dead people never stop talking" (James 2015: 1),¹ uttered by the dead Sir Arthur George Jennings, a pre-independence political figure who reappears from time to time particularly to accompany the deaths of major characters such as the teenage gangster Bam-Bam.

¹ From here on, page numbers without further indication refer to *A Brief History of Seven Killings*.

The novel aims at making sense of, mostly, the very turbulent decade of the 1970s in Jamaica, as well as its consequences, which extend historically until the 1990s and geographically until New York. In particular, the incident around which the whole narrative is constructed are those 5 minutes on the 3rd December 1976 which according to the author “changed everything” (James 2015), but which seem to have been disregarded in the majority of accounts: the Bob Marley’s attempted murder triggered by the electoral campaign of 1976, two days before a concert in the name of national unity which was to take place shortly before the election. The repercussions of this attack were manifold, and above all it was proof of the political dimension of violence, and of the connections between organized crime and parliamentary politics, as well as the connections of the latter with the CIA, in particular.

This overtly and unapologetically violent novel is read by Philip Nanton as “an allegory for the Caribbean abyss” (2015: 79), since the novel’s central concerns are violence and death. In fact, these continue to overshadow the reality of many nations in the Caribbean region such as Jamaica, Bahamas, Trinidad or Saint Kitts and Nevis; countries with some of the highest crime rates in the world. In the novel most of the killings take the form of horrible deaths; victims are shot, burnt, hanged, beaten and stabbed. Death is depicted as a staple in the ghetto of West Kingston, which according to Demus – a Ghetto-dweller and gangster – turns into the “Wild West” (107). The ubiquity of death in the ghetto is paralleled by its unaccountability – which is sadly still a reality nowadays, as Bam-Bam explains, “life don’t mean nothing. Is nothing to kill a boy” (11). However, criminality does not only afflict the ghetto, violence is an everyday threat for all. Nina Burgess, a middle-class young woman, describes its imminence and the control it has over her life: “It’s not the crime that bothers me... I mean, it bothers me like it bothers anybody...it’s the possibility that it can happen at any time, any second, even in the next minute...Even if it never comes, the point is I’ll be waiting for it” (103).

It is worth noting that James was born in an already independent Jamaica and educated in the island. As part of a younger generation of West Indian writers, he offers a perspective different from that of writers born in what was still the British West Indies and mostly educated in the Metropolis. This is reflected in his use of language as well as his choice of dealing with homosexuality. Even though language has always been a theme in itself in West Indian literature, James’ reflection of the linguistic context of the island takes on a new dimension. As has also been the case of many of James’ predecessors, he seeks to legitimise the use of Creole in literature. The novel reflects an obsession with speaking “proper English” and not “chatting bad” – that is, speaking Patwa or Jamaican Creole – as well as its connection with a strict class division. The author carefully employs code-switching, as in real everyday speech situations, and the different voices move within the Creole continuum based on both the interlocutor or on different interlocutors and the context. The more than a dozen different characters which narrate the story or “history” – as the title goes – through their different voices, allow him to avoid a unified narrative, and the subsequent hierarchical distinction between narration and dialogue. Thanks to this cacophony of voices and multiple perspectives, the writer’s reflection of the linguistic context is indisputably full of nuance.

On the other hand, James has also contributed to reversing the region's traditional non-treatment of non-heterosexual matters in literature. In terms of sexuality in general, the Caribbean region is defined by conservatism. However, as Jennifer Rahim explains, "a new trajectory on sexuality is developing in Caribbean cultural discourse, one that has been encouraged by the increasing boldness of creative writers in engaging the theme" (2006: 3-4). This way, moving away from the omission of the homoerotic in Caribbean literature, a new cadre of writers have emerged among whom Rahim includes Shani Mottoo, Patricia Powell, Dionne Brand, Lawrence Scott and Michelle Cliff. James, who could certainly be added to the list, includes a West Kingston gay gangster, Weeper as a main character of his novel. Even though the existence of an openly gay gangster in the 1970s in Jamaica might be rather implausible, it nonetheless allows the writer to reflect, as the author himself has expressed, both the gayness and hypocrisy of Jamaica (James 2016). In the novel Weeper fears for his life, and is forced to hide his sexual orientation from society. Even though his superior and West Kingston Don Josey Wales is aware of his "sodomite business" (69), he nonetheless expects that "[e]very time he fuck a woman I hope that this is the woman that fix him. Because some disease lick him in prison, something that make him not normal" (138). He, therefore, follows the prescribed terms of existence for non-heterosexual persons in the region, and even more so in the case of the world of Jamaican gangs, that is, what Rahim calls "mandatory invisibility" (2006: 3) for social survival or really, as in the case of Weeper, sheer survival. He accepts the impossibility of living out of the closet and ever being able to experience a movie-kind of scene in bed with a partner the morning after:

Think like a movie. This part you put on your clothes, boy wake up (but boy would be girl) and one of you say babe, I gotta go. Or stay in bed and do the whatever, the sheet at the man waist but right at the woman breast. Never going to be a movie with a scene like this bedroom ever. Don' know. (447)

All in all, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is certainly a ground-breaking West Indian crime novel. This award-winning novel brings forward unheeded issues, and offers formerly subdued perspectives that help understand and come to terms with the history of the island of Jamaica, and the Caribbean region as a whole.

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