

HOPE AND HYSTERIA IN JAMTOWN

A Brief History of Seven Killings

Add a pinch of Quentin Tarantino, a sprinkle of George R.R. Martin, and a heap of Marlon James' Jamaican roots and you get: dons, gangs, CIA officials, journalists, drug dealers, inmates, hit men, carjackers, drug lords, drug addicts, closeted gays, pretenders, the unemployed, ghosts.

In James' *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, all of the characters play a role—designated, assigned, inherited, chosen—to achieve a means to an end. Sometimes (most times), that end is a one-way ticket to the grave. It's no wonder then that James opens with the voice of a ghost who muses upon the living and the dead. “*Listen*,” Sir Arthur George Jennings begins, drawing the reader into his subliminal grip. For how else to begin a novel with the word *killings* in the title?

Jamaica in 1976 is, to an American, an island of lush sand and mild sun where the living is easy. Even Tristan Phillips, a minor character who speaks to journalist Alex Pierce from prison, suggests so and something more: “So lay it on me as the Americans say, what is it about Jamaica? The beautiful beaches? Because you know, Pierce, we're more than a beach, we're a country” [567]. I can picture James responding in a parenthetical aside: *Yes, Tristan, a country with little to show in the way of hope*. It is absurd then that the root of the novel rests in a man who resides at 56 *Hope Road*: musician celebrity Bob Marley, referred to only as ‘The Singer’. It is this man, on a gated hill overlooking Kingston, that inspires more than a dozen diverse voices to interlock.

This masterpiece, one that began as a novella of haphazard stories without direction, now has room to breathe. James grants his characters the space and time to make their case, to defend their way of life, and to damn those who get in their way. He blends Jamaican patois—the dialect of the common people—into most of the narratives. From there, a small handful of American plots (and accents), like those of Alex Pierce and CIA station chief Barry Diflorio, bump up against the brutal customs of Jamaica. However, it's the worldwide hysteria surrounding The Singer—and his attempted assassination—that forges the main arc.

The hysteria, fleshed out by intertwining chapters of first-person narratives, illuminates in all its biting glory the real Jamaica. For Josey Wales—don of Copenhagen City, leader of the Storm Posse gang, and arguably the main character—power is intrinsic and necessary for survival. He says, “In the ghetto there is no such thing as peace. There is only this fact. Your power to kill me can only be stop by my power to kill you [416]. In just a few lines, James demonstrates the world (albeit daunting) we've willingly subscribed to. We have a choice to participate. But for Josey, choice isn't in the cards because his deck has already been drawn. For Josey, power—by the credibility gained through the role of leader—is enough because it has to be enough. Because for Josey, the choice is between power or casket. James is liberal when it comes to exposing his characters from all angles—and unapologetically so. Even Josey, a man wired to be tough and hard, is tender as he contemplates peace and family: “What is peace? Peace is my blowing a little breeze on my daughter forehead when she sweat in her sleep” [398]. In this world, peace only exists in the fluids that run from a body when it sleeps and when it dies. Perhaps, though, that is only relief: peace in disguise.

In *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, James plays by his own rules. How he's able to create prose that is tight and controlled yet erratic and messy, I don't know. But I'm also not surprised he cites William Faulkner as an influence. Faulkner's single sentence stream-of-consciousness signature is found explicitly in the way James handles every death in the novel. After the first few killings, I quickly caught on to his intent—one sentence, in-fact, lasts approximately two pages. James gets away with this because he has complete command of his language. I trust him. More importantly, I believe and am invested in the characters he's lit a fire under. All of them, shining so bright (even amid the bloodshed), tell their story in their own patois without an omnipresent narrator breathing down their neck. This is a fun, thrilling, and daunting read, but it is not for the faint of heart.