

## Thoughts on Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings*.

In *Middle Passage*, a travelogue in which V. S. Naipaul revisits the Caribbean, the author is swept up by the voices of its inhabitants. As one taxi driver tells him, "Is only when you live here as long as me that you know the sort of animal it is". And understanding exactly what sort of 'animal' Jamaica is remains at the heart of James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. Like *Middle Passage*, James's book is a whirlwind of different voices, intertwining and separating as the novel proceeds. Yet unlike *Middle Passage* there is no artful attempt to spare the darkness of what was once the heart of the slave trade. As one of James's characters says when talking about Naipaul's travelogue, 'The beauty of how him write that sentence still lie to you as to how ugly [West Kingston] is'.

Ostensibly *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is about the failed assassination of the reggae singer, Bob Marley, immediately before a peace concert organised by the socialist People's National Party (PNP) in 1976. Marley was wounded but went on to play the concert. He left straight afterwards and did not return to Jamaica for two years. The gunmen were never brought to justice and their identities remain a mystery.

Even before James's novel, the fog of uncertainty surrounding these events had elevated them to mythical status. James takes the few facts that are known and runs with them, as any novelist worth his salt would. James gives us seven assassins, perhaps drawing on Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954); but in James's tale these guys are certainly not on the side of the angels. The novel follows their fictional deaths over the coming years, a gruesome catalogue of violence fueled by cocaine and guns, with the truly demonic Josey Wales at its centre. The novel has a cast list of seventy-five characters. Although some have only walk-on parts, a large number speak to us directly, forming a bewildering collage of voice. Pretty much all of them are fictional although some, such as the journalist Alex Pierce, are based on actual people. Perhaps the most interesting is that of Sir Arthur Jennings, a murdered Jamaican politician, again fictional, who becomes a sort of one-man Greek chorus narrating from the grave. As he says right at the beginning of the novel, 'Dead people never

stop talking'. It is through these different voices that we get the garbled, fractured fates of the gunmen. But we also get much more. Slowly we begin to see the murky involvement of the CIA, desperate to prize Jamaica away from its growing infatuation with communist Cuba. As Papa-lo, the don of Copenhagen City, implores fruitlessly, 'Save order from chaos'. Yet if there's a message in James's tale, it's that the scars of slavery and oppression run deep. And with such a heart of darkness, chaos will never be far away.

The success of James's novel ultimately rests with the strength of these voices. The Jamaican characters are particularly compelling. Less successful are the middle-class Americans, the journalist Alex Pierce and the CIA chief, Barry Diflorio. Yet the ambition of the novel can't be denied. James in his acknowledgements cites the importance of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) although perhaps a stronger comparison can be made to the earlier work *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) with its four sections covering eighteen years. Like Faulkner, James uses the full range of first-person trickery, including long single-sentence stream of consciousness and even a poem. Yet, famously, even Faulkner had to switch to third person right at the end of *The Sound and the Fury* to bring the story together. James' novel doesn't do this but it does suffer from the weaknesses of his enforced solipsism in other ways, the need for artificial summary, for example, and the crow-barring in of historical context. As a consequence *A Brief History of Seven Killings* has a curiously old-fashioned feel to it, a return to the experimentalism of the early twentieth century. Recent novels such as Will Self's *Umbrella* (2012) and David Pearce's *Red or Dead* (2013) have shown how the great Modernist project can be pushed forwards in new and exciting ways. This is not to say that what James' is doing isn't exciting and important in it's own way. It's rather that the experimental part of the novel is less the bravura of its form and more the forensic exposition of its subject, the deep emotional scars of the Caribbean. It looks like Naipaul's taxi driver was right all along.