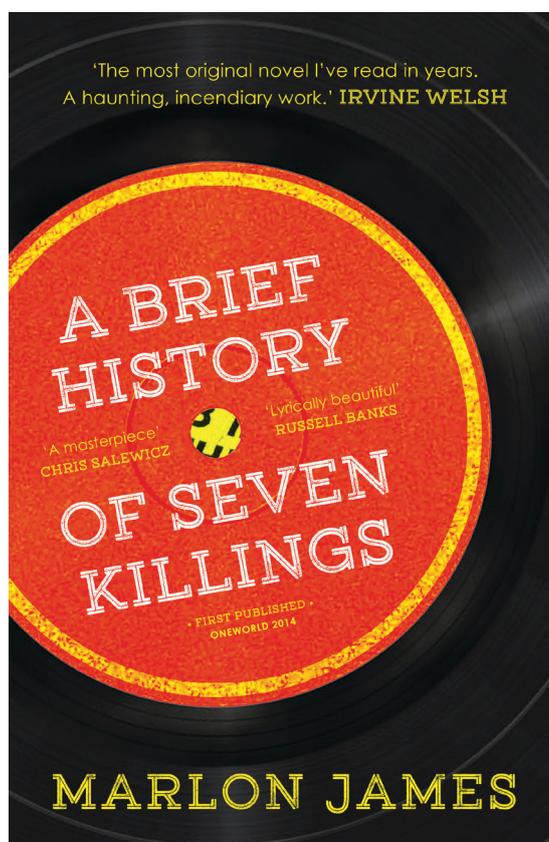




Oneworld Readers' Guide



A Brief History of Seven Killings

Marlon James

On December 3, 1976, just before the Jamaican general election and two days before Bob Marley was to play the Smile Jamaica Concert, seven gunmen stormed his house with machine guns blazing. The attack nearly killed the Reggae superstar, his wife and his manager. Marley would go on to perform at the free concert on December 5, but he left the country the next day, not to return for two years.

Deftly spanning decades and continents and peopled with a wide range of characters – killers, gang members, politicians, FBI and CIA agents, journalists, conmen and even Keith Richards' drug dealer – *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is the fictional exploration of that dangerous and unstable time and its bloody aftermath.

About the Author

Marlon James was born in Jamaica. He is the author of *The Book of Night Women*, which won the Dayton Literary Peace Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. He is a professor of English Literature and Creative Writing at Macalester College, Minnesota, USA.

Discussion Points

1. The novel's structure invites the reader to play detective/journalist. In this sense, did you feel akin to *Rolling Stone* journalist Alex Pierce when reading *A Brief History of Seven Killings*? Is there one character that you feel ties the novel together?
2. The majority of the characters in the novel are male, but it's often Nina and her shape-shifting ways that readers are keen to discuss. Can her constant reinventing of herself, and her journey from Jamaica to America, be seen as belonging to any narrative tradition(s)?



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3. The latter parts of the novel are set in America but even before this America (and Americana generally) has a pull on the characters, whether politically or culturally. Discuss the place of America in the novel and its influence on the characters.
4. The novel has a great title, but in addition to its ironic overtones do you think there is a serious message about the difficulties of writing a single, all encompassing history? The novel's structure, with its multitude of voices and first-person narratives, seems to resist this idea, even point to its futility?
5. Marlon James has said in Jamaica there's a saying: "If it no go so, it go near so", meaning that if the story is not the whole truth, then it's so close that it's a form of truth anyway. Do you think a novelist has a duty to be factually accurate?
6. In *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, Bob Marley is referred to as just "the Singer" – he is a peripheral figure. Why do you think this is?
7. Some characters have proper names, while others have nicknames. Consider the significance of this.
8. *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, for the most part, progresses chronologically, but would you describe the narrative as linear?
9. The "Novel" has been described by many as being the most democratic of literary forms – its length and assimilation of multiple voices allowing it to represent a variety of different ideological viewpoints. To what extent can *A Brief History of Seven Killings* be said to be democratic in this sense?
10. Do specific details and cultural references (e.g., names of real people, bands and television shows) add authenticity to James' fictional creations?
11. Politicians, gang enforcers, C.I.A. operatives, Cuban Bay of Pigs alumni, corrupt police officers and musical hangers-on all inhabit the same world in *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. It is a period of Jamaican history where the melding of politics and culture is particularly pronounced. To what extent does this blurring exist in today's society and culture?
12. Did you find the Jamaican patois alienating or immersive?
13. In an interview in the *New York Times* Marlon James has said that "history is always shaping everything". How did your understanding of the assassination attempt and its aftermath alter as the novel progressed?
14. Did you find the ending satisfying?