

'ESCAPE FOR ME WAS WRITING'

Marlon James is the first Jamaican to win the Man Booker Prize, but as a gay man he was afraid of how he'd be received in his native nation

BY RICHARD SMIRKE
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It's been nine months since Marlon James became the first Jamaican writer to win the Man Booker Prize, the large bags under his eyes and the mumbled, monosyllabic greeting are testament to the relentless cycle of travel, festival appearances, interviews and store signings that come with taking home literature's most prestigious award.

"I don't want to come across as one of those people who whine about success because they are really annoying, and having a successful book sure as hell beats not having a successful book, but it does get super-exhausting and I have the cranky attitude to prove it," said the 45-year-old author, awkwardly slumped on a sofa in a corner of a plush hotel lobby in Manchester, England.

"Nobody tells you this until you win it, but every Booker winner that I have run into since says that by the time you get to October, you are super happy to hand it over to the next person. 'It's yours. Take it!'" he said, gleefully pretending to pass on the title.

Realizing that he is maybe starting to sound ungrateful, James stresses that his overnight elevation to the literary A-list is "incredibly exciting, and I get to meet wonderful people." But it is nonetheless highly repetitive. "Right now, my days are just traveling, doing readings and sleep. That's pretty much it."

By way of illustration, it's only after 30 minutes of chatting that it suddenly dawns on him where in the U.K. he is. "My God. I just realized I'm in Manchester," said the music-loving writer, who cited the Smiths and Factory Records' back catalog as being "crucial" to his teenage years. "There must be a New Order museum here, right?"

Upon hearing that a) there is not and b) the Hacienda nightclub – whose reputation evidently spread all the way to Jamaica – was knocked down and turned into apartments years ago, his excitement nosedived.

"That has got to be the most depressing thing I've heard all day."

Manchester's credentials as a cutting-edge

music city took a further battering when the lobby band started playing a cheesy cover of "Long Train Running" by the Doobie Brothers. "Seriously?" questioned the author, only half-joking. "This is like people coming to Jamaica and hearing disco. Manchester, what is going on?"

But the Doobie Brothers provides a period soundtrack to the book we're here to discuss: "A Brief History of Seven Killings," James's epic, gripping and uncompromisingly violent prize-winning novel.

Inspired by a real-life incident in 1976 when seven gunmen stormed Bob Marley's house in Kingston, the book's sweeping narrative spans three decades, crosses several continents and encompasses a cast of more than 70 characters, including ghosts, cold-blooded hit men, beauty queens, drug dealers, politicians, prostitutes, a Rolling Stone reporter and CIA agents.

The scale, scope and sheer ambition of the 700-page book – James' third in a late-blooming literary career – is staggering, although he said it wasn't always intended that way. "It was supposed to be this short crime novel about a bumbling assassin," said the dreadlocked author, who spent four years working on "A Brief History" and called it "the riskiest and loosest thing I ever wrote."

"It's the furthest I've ever gone from my definition of what a novel should be. I was fully prepared for everybody going, 'This went too far. This is too self-indulgent. This is too long.' At some point I threw out the rule book about plot, and I was constantly trying to surprise myself on every page. The only thing that I had as a guide was that everything that's in my head was going down on the page regardless of what form it came down in. A novel should be an adventure for the writer, too."

In James' case, that adventure started in his childhood, growing up in Portmore, an affluent suburb outside Kingston. Obsessed with reading from a young age, he recalled devouring every book in his parents' house before

similarly exhausting the school library. Before long, he was writing his own comics, superhero science fiction and fantasy stories, all of which had an escapist theme.

"The one thing that unites nearly every single suburb on the planet is that for the most part, suburban living is long stretches of boredom punctuated by sports and going to the movies. The best thing about being in such a – at best stable, at worst dull and endlessly repetitive – existence, is that you end up looking for escape, and escape for me was writing. Even when I'm writing about really complicated, dark, violent, twisted stuff, it's still an escape. My upbringing just made me hungry for stories that weren't mine."

His first novel, "John Crow's Devil," about a religious cult that destroys a Jamaican village, was turned down 78 times before eventually being published in 2005. He can laugh about it now, but at the time, the large pile of rejection letters made him seriously question his future as a writer.

"I was done. I just gave up on the idea," said James, who described unsuccessfully trying to track down and destroy every copy of the unpublished manuscript after one particularly painful rejection. "Some of the people who turned down that book were seriously smart people, and for me to hold onto the idea that 78 people were just wrong and I'm right was ludicrous. As it turns out, I was right."

Following its publication, James

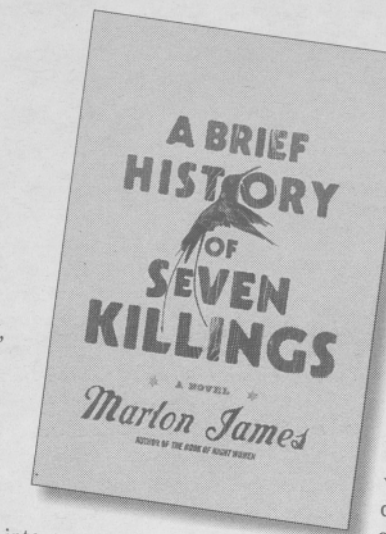
quit his successful but unfulfilling career in advertising and took up a teaching post at a small arts college in Minnesota, where he still lives. The distance and separation from his home country, where homosexuality is still criminalized, enabled him to come to terms with both his own sexuality and some of the unspoken, less savory aspects of Jamaica's history. "Either I saved myself in Minnesota or Minnesota saved me," he once said.

James' second novel, "The Book of Night Women," about a slave revolt on an 18th-century Jamaican sugar plantation, told through the eyes of a woman born into slavery, came out in 2009 and won international acclaim for its evocative and uncensored prose. "For me, novels aren't just where plot happens. They are also where the things that I want to get off my chest end up being said and characters become the mouthpiece for that without becoming didactic."

He said he wrote "The Book of Night Women" to dispel the myth, "even among black people, of the house negro who had it so good that they sat with the house master."

The fact that all three of his books to date, as well as the novel he is currently writing, a "Game of Thrones"-style fantasy story set in Africa during the Middle Ages, are based in the past stems

from a



desire to redress the colonial history he was taught at school, James said.

"Until I hit college, history was reading about people who don't look like me, don't talk like me and have nothing to do with my life. From Columbus down to Queen Victoria, it was all dead Europeans."

The history of the world, he said, is typically the story of rich and powerful people. "The people who have to suffer from what they do don't get histories. I don't necessarily think I write the past to rectify it, but I do write it to highlight issues that history books aren't telling us."

"A Brief History of Seven Killings" and its sprawling cast of lowly gangsters, sex workers and corrupt politicians, rooted in first-hand sources and historical fact, brings his home country's recent and violent past to life in vivid and damning style. The book's global success has made the author internationally famous and led to a deal with HBO to write a TV adaptation. But for a long time after the book was published, he resisted traveling home for fear of how he would be received. When he did finally return earlier this year, he was pleasantly surprised.

"By and large, Jamaicans are happy for the success of the book and think it can be a turning point for the discussions we are having in Jamaica. That's not to say everything is peachy. The first thing I went back for was a Bob Marley lecture, and people set up websites where all the homophobic bigotry came pouring out – 'Can't believe that some batty boy is talking about Marley,' and so forth. So I'm not kidding myself that that isn't there. But for the most part, people were very happy to see me. I've been there twice now, and there is so much about both trips that was so refreshing and positive."

He described meeting members of a gay students association and thinking that he had to give them an uplifting, inspirational speech about how life can and does get better.

"They just wanted to talk about Beyoncé," recalled James, grinning at the memory. "That really made my night. It still doesn't mean that I'm going to walk down the street holding some guy's hand, but I do think that the situation is slowly changing for the better."

Courtesy of Big Issue North / INSP.ngo.



Marlon James won the 2015 Man Booker Prize, a prestigious literary award, for his novel "A Brief History of Seven Killings."

PHOTO BY JEFFREY SKEMP