

INTERVIEW WITH

Marlen James

Marlon James is the author of three novels, most recently *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, which won the coveted Man Booker Prize in 2015. He is also the writer behind *John Crow's Devil*, published 2005, and *The Book of Night Women*, published 2009. Since 2007, James has been a professor of creative writing at Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota. He has also written for numerous publications, including *The New York Times*. During his visit to Butler University as part of the Vivian S. Delbrook Visiting Writers Series, James took the time to speak with *Manuscripts* staff member Julian Wyllie.

One thing I'd like to ask you about is your lyricism and your influences, whether that's different music, maybe different kinds of films, because one of the parts in A Brief History of Seven Killings that interests critics and readers is the extended narrative poem by the character Bam-Bam, between the prose. What made you change the form of your novel in this way?

I think it came down to me being true to the voice that was in my head. It wasn't enough to think only verse would suit one section over the next because these are the ideas I have about writing a novel and telling a narrative. A whole bunch of things happen in the process of it going from what's in my head to the page. I say to myself: "No one would really read that," or "My editor will cut that out," or "That's not fiction," or "This is not the way in which a proper novel is structured." By the time all of those different things finish attacking me, by the time I'm done with it, I end up with a novel that's not necessarily a bad novel, but it becomes one that isn't paying too much attention to literary conventions.

Would you say that your end product is disjointed, maybe abstract, or are you simply saying it's unconventional?

Yes, well, [*A Brief History*] was deliberately disjointed in a way. I was hoping things like theme or voice would join the characters together. But sections like that are the sections that just made sense to me in my head, an event that is so fractured and is so robbed of coherent thought, such as Bam-Bam trying to kill somebody and escaping, that it couldn't be represented in straightforward conventional prose. It's not a conventional scene, you're not doing a conventional thing.

And it's not really a conventional story either. It's like that phrase you use all the time "If it not go so, it go near so." It's the idea of abandoning one ultimate historical truth in favor of adopting multiple sets of truths.

Yes, and it was important for me to not settle on one version of why the characters tried to kill Marley. I don't think there's a settled version. There's a compelling argument for all sorts of reasons why.

And in the past you've talked about having so many characters and so many voices, being inspired by Faulkner's novel As I Lay Dying. Perhaps that was a bit of a risk to have so many characters tell this particular history. Did you originally have a somewhat traditional third-person narrative?

It was never third-person but it was a novella, and I originally thought all of these voices were separate small novels, not even connected at all.

Would you have had the smaller sections published in different pockets or different times?

No, this isn't thinking in terms of publishing, more about how I initially thought the novel would be. I thought it was sort of meant to be this crime novella. In fact, the very first page I wrote is now on page 458 of that book. It was about this hitman from Chicago who's a little too trigger happy and

who's commissioned to kill this gay guy, a Jamaican, although we don't know he's gay yet, because said character has been running the drug trade in the Bronx and Brooklyn.

And that would've been the 1980s so you had to go back in time again for Marley's section.

Precisely. But coming back to this, I thought it was a crime novella originally because I was reading these really brief crime stories by Jean-Patrick Manchette and Jim Thompson, and crime is probably my favorite genre of fiction. But I kept running into these dead-ends while writing. I would just abandon it and go write another book but the same thing kept happening, just these dead-ends, and one of the reasons this happened is because I kept thinking the process in which I wrote the previous novel, which is about finding that voice that will carry me throughout the narrative, is what I was looking for with this. And I kept failing because I didn't know what was wrong until a friend of mine, Rachel, pointed something out to me. She said, "Why do you think it's one person's novel? Why do you think it's one person's story?"

It's amazing how one person's thought might change the whole story.

That always happens to me. That's why I'm terrible at giving advice. People always ask, "How did you hit the breakthrough for your novel?" and I just go, "Get some good friends who will one day say something cool." That's exactly what happened with this. It's the same thing that happened with *The Book of Night Women* too. I was talking to a poet from the Congo and she said, "You know, in African societies things can be very matriarchal. Women decide on things like when to plant crops and so on," then it hit me and I wondered what if someone tried to build a power center of women on a slave plantation. So yes, most of the breakthrough ideas for my novels come from just talking to people.

Earlier you brought up this idea of what is considered to be a “proper novel.” Your work subsequently breaks some of the rules from what is considered to be good and bad English as well. Reports say you had researchers help you capture the smaller details of some slang and what the characters would’ve eaten in the 1970s or 80s. With that said, what was the process of gathering the information and making it as accurate as possible?

I think research is very important. I’m very big on research. I’ll spend years doing it and I’ll still do more of it as I’m writing. If I did this on my own it would’ve taken me ten years to write the book so I got help which is basically students going for extra credit.

I was wondering how that worked but you beat me to it.

Pretty much all of them are students or former students and they’re great great kids who don’t need much direction. But when I sit down to write a novel I have to be equipped with enough knowledge or authority that I can just, not breeze through it, but write with a certain ease. A lot of stuff the novel will encompass is based on what I know beforehand. The downside is that I can get bogged down in research pretty easily. And it’s not just the big stuff like “Who was President” and so on, but it’s stuff like “What was the most popular deodorant at the time?” I think about this because when you start to write you realize real characters don’t just sit around thinking about your plot all day long. That’s why I ask my students, “If the plot or story in your novel had not happened, what would your character be doing that day?” And then you have to have them at least try to do it, you know? Because before the car crash they were likely getting their dry cleaning.

In that case, with a novel that goes through a certain time period, did use something like a chart or a graph to show where characters would be at specific points?

Oh, yes, I love charts, huge charts, or Moleskine notebooks where I draw columns and times of the day, or rows going up and down, across, and left to right for the characters so I knew where they are at any given point. There a lot of benefits to this, but I can imagine some writers being horrified by being that methodological. For me, however, it stopped me from playing favorites, because if I just wrote [*A Brief History*] it would've been a 500 page book about a hitman or it would be all Nina Burgess. This process made me a lot more democratic with how much time I spent with each character. It also sort of kept me within the whole world of what was going on because we're talking multiple multiple characters and I wanted to be fair to all of them.

So did you have any characters that were harder to write or ones you were less interested in, say, Alex Pierce for example, who is a white Englishman and music journalist? Was it difficult to get inside the mind of a person like that?

He wasn't difficult to write to be honest.

I personally loved Alex Pierce. I think he was one of my favorites.

Alex Pierce is interesting because his dilemma as a character is based on the writer creating him, which is how do you avoid authoring one of those well-meaning white people who comes to a non-white country and has an epiphany. I hate those kinds of characters and I'm not interested in those stories.

The whole white savoir thing, is that what you mean?

Or the white witness, you know, those characters who fall in love with a local black person or a local Indian. I just wasn't interested in those transformative white person narratives. But at the same time I genuinely had a white character who wants to transform.

And Alex had some honest moments, like when he talks about the Rolling Stones and says the group was trying to fake the reggae thing, so you had some moments where he's speaking a little truth to power.

Alex does that and he's still self-aware, but he's still buying into it, because his actual prose is really, really overwrought.

And you picked the New Yorker as the publication he writes for.

You know, I wonder if that's why they won't publish me.

That's amazing because that scene is hilarious to me even though the New Yorker is one of my favorite magazines. It makes sense because Alex is a little uppity, a little bit of a try-hard.

Alex's prose was one of my favorite things to write because his actual work is not that good. He's just trying too hard. And on that note, Alex was a very important turning point for me in terms of writing characters for this. It was then that I realized that it's not necessarily the character himself but about how much depth and dimension you give to the character. It's not about a character who isn't trying to be a white savior. It's about a character who is critical of things but is also doing those same things himself. I didn't want to write a white savior, true, but I didn't want to write someone who was conscious of it.

And in the end he comes off as just a human trying to chase the Marley story down. He makes mistakes and does things that sort of reveal him.

That's why in the third part of the novel he's adding up all these reasons why a hitman would be on his bed but he can't add it together. He can't see that yes, this is why they are here to kill you, because you know too much. But that wasn't the first time I ran into a character like that. For example, another

conflict is that Jamaicans are very self-conscious about negative portrayals of Jamaica with the violence, and I wrestled with the question of if I'm adding to the negative representations of Jamaica, since I'm very concerned with that. But again, it's not just about the characters like a gunman, it's the depth and dimension you bring to it. I tell my students who are afraid to write "the other," whether it's another race or so on, that I'd rather you write a three-dimensional black guy where you get the language wrong than you nail the slang and it's a cartoon. So writing characters like Alex Pierce reminded me that the real thing is to complicate them, it's not to make them acceptable.

Another thing along these lines is that you've established this comfortability with the idea that really great characters can be really bad people. You inevitably established a complexity with the violence, with the narratives of rape and murder.

And that's the thing isn't it, because the concern I get most is people saying my novel is loaded with violence and I challenge them on it. You can put two Shakespearean plays together and there's a lot more violence going on there than in my book.

I'd say Hemingway even.

Right, and I think people don't realize it because they confuse preponderance with resonance. For example, and this may be totally out of the blue, but everyone knows the rock band Led Zeppelin. And Led Zeppelin being the definitive heavy metal band makes people see them as the heaviest of the heaviest even though fifty percent of their albums features acoustic songs. If another person made those albums they would've called it a folk record with some rock touches.

Maybe that's because of the era. Maybe that was the hardest they had.

Well, not just that, but the thing with Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones is that the hard tracks are so hard, the loud tracks are so loud, that they reverberate for the rest of the album, even though you just went through two ballads one after the other. It's like listening to Led Zeppelin IV. Everyone remembers "When the Levee Breaks," but "Going to California" comes right before it. So although there's a preponderance of "loud" on that album we have all these other things, and it's the same with violence. It's not that there's a lot of it in the books I write, it's that I believe violence should resonate. Readers should know people are dying here. It's not film violence where an actor can kill fifty people with a machine gun and save the girl and walk off.

Basically that's the Terminator logic.

Exactly. No one watches that and thinks, "Wow, that's fifty wives who no longer have a husband."

Maybe that's due to societal pressures on who we give the authority to depict violence.

Yes, but this is also about who has the authority to be glib about it. To me, it doesn't matter if you killed the worst person, you still killed somebody. That is a dead human being who will never be anything anymore because you cut their life short. That idea to me was very important. I just think violence should be violent. I'm not interested in a kind of superhero violence where Superman or Thor can destroy half of a city but there's not one death.

Or most times with those sorts of movies we don't even see the death, which might be worse.

You're right, it doesn't even resonate. It doesn't resonate because no one talks about the loss of life. And for the record, there's no way you can evacuate New York in twenty minutes

like they show in those movies.

Transformers, guilty as charged.

Good luck just evacuating Bed-Stuy in twenty minutes much less all of Manhattan. It can't happen. But that's because we have these stories of bloodless violence and I don't believe in bloodless violence.

Another thing about this topic of how we receive art may relate to other art forms. One thing we've mentioned earlier is music and an artist you've noted in interviews, Kendrick Lamar, has some of the same problems, where one song may be taken out of context of an album, just like one violent scene may be used to say your entire book is violent.

I think there's a certain laziness factor there. If you cherry-pick then you don't have to be complicated. I did an article on Kendrick for *The New York Times* on how complicated my reaction was to that album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*. I love it, but it took me a year to love it. I wrestled with it for a year just as I am wrestling with Frank Ocean right now.

Maybe that's a sign of great art, that you can initially feel one way then grow with it.

Exactly. In that article for *The New York Times* I wrote about the song "The Blacker the Berry" on the Kendrick album and how I initially took it as bootstrapping. But I realized that an album like that is something you can't cherry-pick from. You have to deal with the totality of the art. And on a different note, nobody watches a Scorsese film and only talks about one scene. With some artists we give them the benefit of the doubt.

That's an interesting point because with movies we do take in the entire film. We watch Star Wars for the entirety, not just Empire Strikes Back or Rogue One and separate it from the

entire series. But with books we do pick out scenes, and especially with music we'll take one song out of fifteen to construct an argument. Why do you think that is?

It's because our attention spans are getting shorter and shorter. It's a chicken and egg thing because we can say people don't want to read anymore so we'll give them small stuff. Or it could be that we give people small stuff so they don't read.

Are we teaching laziness or are we embracing it?

Well, I think of it this way: Back in my old life as an advertising copywriter I did work for a newspaper. I was writing long copy and they would tell me, "You know, no one is going to read this." I would tell them, "But you're a newspaper. You don't have faith in your own prose?" Then I said something else that cost me the account. I said, "Maybe it's not that they don't read long copy, it's that they're not finding anything interesting to read." The lesson is simple. It's okay to write competent prose, the question is if you're writing dazzling prose. Sometimes it's just our fault. But back to the point, it's easier to be for or against things when they're not seen as complicated. I'm thinking of that line in *To Pimp a Butterfly* now, "Loving you is complicated."

People can sort of internalize lines like that, just like your books if they understand the perspective.

Well, another idea I think of with records like that is the idea of us assuming it must be a diary, which is something we tend to give writers of color and women. We assume anything those two groups write must be experiential. On the other hand nobody says that about David Bowie. Nobody thinks Bruce Springsteen lived through half of the realities he sings about, yet we don't question the authenticity one bit. That's no diss either, because Bruce is fantastic, but if a woman from Greenwich Village wrote those songs they'd say it's inauthentic. We still do that. I hear people say Janelle Monáe, for example,

“needs to write from the heart,” but I never heard anyone say that about Bowie.

Perhaps that’s because fans tend to disregard the teams of people that help make great art. I think with you being open to the idea of small help from researchers changes that. Did you have researchers for John Crow’s Devil or The Book of Night Women?

I did most of the research with *The Book of Night Women*. I do most work on my own in regards to slavery because coming from the Caribbean the legacy is already there. It’s all around you and some of it I didn’t have to research. As for my first novel *John Crow’s Devil* it was more like a fever dream that wasn’t even supposed to be published.

Reports say John Crow’s Devil was rejected seventy times. Can you confirm?

It was seventy-eight times actually. That novel was more about me proving to myself that I could write. I was in my late twenties and most of the stuff I had worked on before was biographical. I remember listening to Sinead O’Connor’s albums at the time and thinking, “Man, if she ever ends up having a happy year, her career is over.” And that’s when I thought more about writing outside of myself, less about the angsty twenty-something life, and then came the first novel. But I do believe in researching even things you’ve experienced yourself. Even an autobiography is just one person’s opinion.

Do you feel that way of thinking is the hidden journalist in you? In other words, are your novels fictionalized journalism?

I do feel that actually. I was extremely excited when I heard my editor was going to be a non-fiction guy.

It seems like non-fiction bridges a different perspective.

It does. That's why I tell my non-fiction students to go get a journalism degree. That's not a knock on the MFA, I come from MFA culture too, but if you want to do creative non-fiction my advice is to get a journalism degree. It's either that or spend some time with a newspaper to understand how to get the essence of a story, that the story doesn't give a shit about you. And more to that, sometimes people ask me if I'm psychologically damaged by writing about the horrible things that happen in my work. My answer is this, it doesn't, not really.

It actually seems like it's more fun to write about those topics.

It is, it's a lot of work, but it's still fun. That's the sweet spot. And when I write fictional characters I do become a journalist. How I feel about a character's personality doesn't matter to me. That's why I can bring humanity to horrible characters and show the BS in the good characters. I do fall in love with my characters but at the end of the day I have to go to work. I have to be fair because it's very easy to be unfair and play favorites. That's another reason why I have those charts because I could've never written *The Book of Night Women* if I was taking sides. Even the good characters in that book do some terrible things.

With that said it seems like you're on a pace to always write outside of yourself. It doesn't seem like you'll ever publish a biographical novel.

I tend to save biography for non-fiction essays, but my characters do sometimes resemble parts of myself or they share my world view. A lot of what the character Nina Burgess says about class and race in Jamaica is actually me behind the curtain saying it. Like her, I was educated enough to hang out with the higher classes, but I'm not rich. It was very much like being in limbo.

That reminds me of the saying, "Too black for one, not black

enough for the other.”

Yes, and that’s because we attach certain values to black and white culture still. Being in Jamaica sometimes people assume I went abroad for school or they assume I’m rich because I know a certain white person who’s famous. That’s untrue because all of my literary sensibilities were formed in Jamaica. I didn’t have to leave Jamaica to know Patti Smith. I didn’t have to leave Jamaica to read *Moby-Dick*.

It seems you still have the desire to relay your own sense of Jamaica to your audience. You mention Bob Marley, but you also reference Max Romeo, Augustus Pablo, Scratch Perry, all the dub stars, and you pay homage to their art in your art. Is it your intention to give props to these cultural artifacts? Or is it your subconscious simply making note of your influences?

I think it’s more of my subconscious because the reggae profile abroad and back home are not the same thing. A lot of people still think reggae is all Bob Marley, just like some people think all disco is Donna Summer, and so what? There’s nothing really wrong with that. But it was important for me to truly capture the music that people in Jamaica listened to by 1976. It wasn’t just Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, and Bunny Wailer; it was Dillinger, Michigan & Smiley, and Big Youth. Think of the people who couldn’t afford instruments, and think of the future impact Jamaicans would make on hip hop. It’s not that they can take one-hundred percent credit, but it’s a stylistic thing. That’s why for some people hip hop is an art form that came out of nothing. I agree because it was the funk of people who couldn’t afford to buy a bass guitar, and the bass was the B-Side or single sampled as any other instrument. It’s the same thing in Jamaica while you’re toasting over the music you can’t afford to buy yourself. That’s what dancehall and hip hop simultaneously discovered and essentially we now recognize that black music is constantly reinventing itself. It always goes forward and never backwards.

To conclude, do you have any updates on pending ventures, including the series that was slated to be on HBO about A Brief History, and what are you writing for your next book?

The stuff I'm writing now is a trilogy called *Dark Star*. The first novel is called *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*. The controversy around me announcing the book came from comments I made about diversity in *The Hobbit* movie. It's not a historical novel but it's me pulling from this huge reservoir of African stories and myths. I'm not trying to write an African *Moby-Dick*, I'm trying to write like an Octavia Butler or Margaret Atwood. The idea is to get some gut-truths in there about how people treat other people. As for the HBO thing that's not going to happen anymore but we're moving to Netflix now to make it novelistic and for people to binge watch.