

*'A Brief History' of the Winner of a Major Literary Prize*

by ANASTASIA SASEWICH

It's hard to talk about Marlon James' *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, very hard, and not because I wasn't able to finish it. This critically successful, major-prize-winning book has already had so much said about it that it seems an almost pointless endeavor to set out to say something new. The thing (or at least one of them) about *Brief History* is that it's so multifaceted that it's hard to evaluate it on anything resembling a binary basis: good or not, enjoyable or not, engrossing or not, well-written or not. Still, it's this last point I'm most interested in when it comes to *Brief History*, and it is the point that contains within it all the other places from which a book is approached.

The basic assumption of whether something is well-written or not is that the book in question is intended to be art—or, at the very least, artistic in some way. In considering art, one of the key areas of attention is to the craft with which a thing is composed. This assessment of the construction and the composition isn't the sole concern; it is, however, inextricably bound up in another aspect, one that is often forgotten when a book is emblazoned with a badge reading "Winner of the Man Booker Prize" and blurbs by the heaviest hitters in the publishing world cascade down its inside and back covers like water over rocks. It's the question of how we *absorb* the work. How we experience it. How it hits us at our core.

James' third novel has been described as a fictional account of the December 1976 attempted assassination of Bob Marley in the form of an oral history, one told from the point of view of over 30 characters. It's nearly 700 pages long, violent and filled with crime and drugs and guns and murder and intrigue. It is, at the very least, *a lot*.

It's a lot. A lot of characters, a lot of words, a lot of long sentences, a lot of confusion. Reading *Brief History* feels like sitting down at a cafeteria table with the people from a totally different department in a totally different company speaking lingo only they understand. You nod and smile and hope to keep up as best you can. It can be engrossing, fascinating, and intriguing, though it is less these things than it is what follows. Between the Jamaican patois, slang, and stream-of-consciousness prose, the experience of reading it can be exhausting and frustrating. Just when we begin to understand a character or their situation, we're (at best) pulled out of their story to be thrust into someone else's or (at worst) left to pick up our jaws after the character's life is snuffed out as suddenly as a flame in a tornado.

*Brief History*, in a way as brazen as its gangster characters, openly defies the conventions of what makes a book well-written. It's longer than it needs to be (in a way that feels indulgent), there's too many characters, there's no clear continuing thread within each chapter nor among them, the prose is technically flawed.

And yet. Even without finishing it, I can say that it is successful, that it was deserving (at least as much so as any of the other books nominated) of a Major Literary Prize, that it is very close to being (if it is not already) a masterpiece. The thing about *Brief History* is that it is not well-written and it is hard to read but that its technical flaws and the way it hits the reader so effectively carry out what I believe to be the intention of the book: to give us a portrait, unmatched in depth and breadth, of Jamaica and its people at this point in its history.

One of the most impressive aspects of James' novel is that everything that's wrong with *Brief History* is everything that's right with it if you accept that what makes a book (or any work of art) successful (and, indeed, "well-written" at its most basic meaning) is how the message being delivered can be considered in relation to its method of conveyance. *Brief History* isn't a quick or breezy read, to be certain. And though it may be successful in its artfulness, it's still difficult to stick with, and what good is a novel that often goes unfinished? Even so, unfinished as it may go among what I suspect is in reality a larger number of readers that would admit to it, it's a study in how we understand novels – which may be its greatest value after all.