

**ZEST**

**BOOK EVENTS**

**SUNDAY**

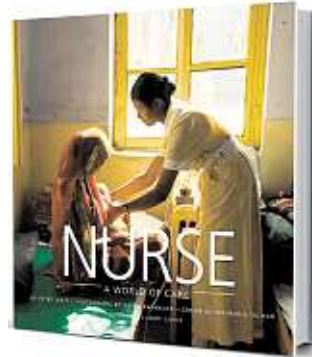
**Crimson Romance Author Signing:** Authors Karen Sue Burns, Andrea R. Cooper, Nicole Flockton, Elizabeth Meyette and Shelley K. Wall will sign their books, 3-5 p.m., Katy Budget Books, 2450 Fry, Houston; 281-578-7770 or katybooks.com.

**MONDAY**

**Cristina Henríquez and Marlon James:** Henríquez ("The Book of Unknown Americans") and Marlon James ("A Brief History of Seven Killings") will discuss and sign their books as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, 7:30 p.m., Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas, \$5 general admission. Information: inprinthouston.org.

**TUESDAY**

**Karen Kasmauski:** National Geographic photographer and co-author of "Nurse: A World of Care," will sign 5-7 p.m., River Oaks Bookstore, 3270 Westheimer; 713-520-0061 or riveroaksbookstore.com.



**WEDNESDAY**

**Henry (Hank) Paulson Jr.:** Author and former Treasury Secretary will discuss his book, "Dealing with China," in conversation with Ambassador Edward Djerejian, 6 p.m., Asia Society Texas Center, 1370 Southmore, \$30; \$20 members. Information: 713-496-9901 or asiasociety.org/texas.

**Ryan Gattis:** Author will discuss and sign "All Involved," 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore, 2421 Bissonnet; 713-523-0701 or brazosbookstore.com.

**THURSDAY**

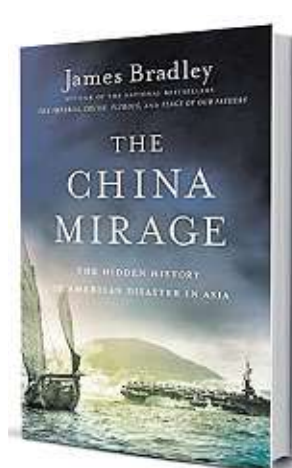
**Connor Franta:** Author will meet fans as they receive pre-signed copies of "Work in Progress," 6 p.m., Blue Willow Bookshop, 14532 Memorial; 281-497-8675 or bluewillowbookshop.com.

**Kevin Prufer and Michael Morse:** Poets will read from their works, 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore.

**FRIDAY**

**Chase Intermeyer:** Author and former U.S. ambassador to Qatar will sign "Inside Reagan's Navy: The Pentagon Journals," 5-7 p.m., River Oaks Bookstore.

**Duane Swierczynski and Dennis Tafoya:** Swierczynski will sign and discuss "Canary" and Tafoya will sign and discuss "The Poor Boy's Game," 6:30 p.m., Murder By The Book, 2342 Bissonnet; 713-524-8597, or toll-free 888-424-2842 or murderbooks.com.



**James Bradley:** Author will discuss and sign "The China Mirage," 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore.

**Gwendolyn Zepeda:** Poet reads from her new collection, "Monsters, Zombies and Addicts," 7:30 p.m., MECA Dow School Auditorium, 1900 Kane; 713-802-9370.

**SATURDAY**

**Joy Preble:** Author will discuss and sign her newest novel for teens, "Finding Paris," 2 p.m., Blue Willow Bookshop.

**Terry Shames and James Anderson:** Shames will sign and discuss "The Last Death of Jack Harbin" and Anderson will sign and discuss "The Never-Open Desert Diner," 4:30 p.m., Murder By The Book.

Maggie Galehouse

# Author wraps Jamaican truths in symphony of fictional voices

Marlon James' latest novel is a Jamaican symphony, a sea of distinct and unforgettable voices. "A Brief History of Seven Killings" wraps fiction around one historical fact: the attempted assassination of Bob Marley in Kingston, Jamaica, on Dec. 3, 1976.

The first half of the saga circles this incident, imagining the gang members and schemers who, wittingly or unwittingly, might have been part of this politically charged event. The second half reaches beyond Kingston to Montego Bay, Miami and New York, up through the early 1990s.

"A big book is almost like a double album," says James, 44, whose accent belies his native Jamaica, although he's on the phone from Minnesota, where he now lives. "You give yourself a big canvas to try things. And even if it fails somewhere, well, another 300 pages are coming along."

This attitude squares with one of the more memorable asides in the book: "Jamaicans are so unflappable," James writes, "they might as well be Minnesotans."

Reading "A Brief History of Seven Killings" — nearly 700 pages and a cast of characters north of 70 — is challenging and intense. Each chapter is told in first-person; chapter headers tell readers who's talking. Sometimes it's a CIA station chief in Kingston. Sometimes it's the don of a Jamaican gang unspooling a thick, stream-of-consciousness patois. Sometimes it's the ghost of a dead politician. Sometimes a Rolling Stone reporter... and the list goes on. Only one voice speaks at a time, but the voices come together in your head. You're still thinking about what the gang member said — "It's a hell of a thing when a gun come home to live with you" — but now you're reading a draft of the American journalist's story: "The Third World slum is a nightmare that defies beliefs or facts, even the ones staring right at you."

The individual voices pile up and before you know it, you've stepped inside 20th-century Jamaica, where rival gangs compete for turf and power, where garbage piles up, electricity is spotty, and curfew is mandatory. It's a symphony of language, blood, brains, piss, music, death and dreams.

"A Brief History of Seven Killings" is James' third book. His first, "John Crow's Devil" (2005), tells the story of a

Jamaican village held hostage by a spiritual feud between two preachers in the 1950s. "The Book of Night Women" (2009), set on a Jamaican sugar plantation at the turn of the 19th century, won the Dayton Literary Peace Prize.

James thought "A Brief History of Seven Killings" would be a noir novella, until a close friend set him straight.

"I kept writing more characters," said the author, who teaches at Macalaster College. "I kept dancing around the Bob Marley event. And I hit a dead end. I said, 'I don't know whose story this is.' And my friend

Rachel said, 'Why do you think it's one person's story?' When was the last time you read 'As I Lay Dying?'"

The 1970s Jamaica that James describes in his novel is teeming with civil unrest. The conservative Jamaica Labor Party clashes with the communist-friendly People's National Party and endless turf battles erupt on the street.

"This was a time when the average election had hundreds of people being killed," James says. "A huge body count. It was a very tribalist kingdom. It was still about territory. Whoever controls this territory controls Kingston. Whoever intimidates Kingston intimidates Jamaica."

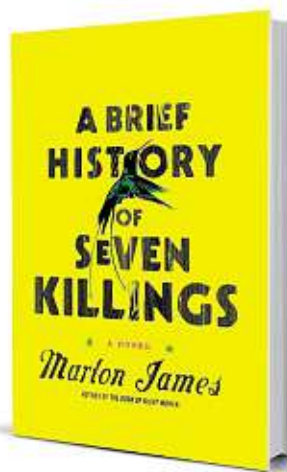
James was just 6 years old when thugs with guns busted into Marley's home and started shooting. This was only two days before "the Singer" — as Marley is called in the novel — was scheduled to appear at a massive free concert. Marley was injured in the attack, but he performed anyway. All that's in the book.

James grew up in a Jamaican household where crime and politics were discussed openly.

"Because Jamaica is small," the author explained, "you can't really escape it. And both my parents are police. My mom's a detective. My dad left the force to become a lawyer. The joke in my



MAGGIE GALEHOUSE Bookish



**Author appearance**

Marlon James will appear with author Cristina Henríquez ("The Book of Unknown Americans") as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series

**When:** 7:30 p.m. Monday

**Where:** Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas

**Tickets:** \$5; inprinthouston.org

family is she locks them up, and he takes them out."

As a child, James also witnessed an explosion of Jamaican culture.

"Jamaican arts, dance, literature developed its own aesthetic," the author says. "The thing about reggae, it reclaimed patois, dialect."

In some ways, James' childhood was an aggregation of Jamaican, British and

American culture.

American TV was hugely popular.

"Growing up in the '70s," he says, "you were raised by 'Sesame Street,' 'The Muppet Show,' 'Charlie's Angels,' 'Starsky and Hutch.'"

At the same time, the British empire was ever-present. Although Jamaica gained independence from Britain in 1962, the island's education system in the 1970s still groomed children to be colonial subjects of the queen.

"I can lay on the straight Jamaican standard English," James laughs. "One aspect of it, we drop adverbs anywhere we want."

He pauses, thinking of an example: "Stop *wastefully* using the water," he says.

One of the biggest influences on "A Brief History of Seven Killings," was James Ellroy's classic crime novel, "American Tabloid" (1995).

"I wanted to know how to tell a story in an expansive way but still have it guided by voice and guided by people in the margins," James explains. "The whole idea of a great American novel is a ludicrous idea we have to get over, but if you were to blackmail me, I'd say it's 'American Tabloid.'"

James is on a "slight" writing break now, but he's researching his next book. A fantasy.

"I love Thor and Zeus, but I'm kind of tired of European mythology," the author says. "I'm reading about Sub-Saharan mythology and religion and history. The research is so crazy. Court dramas, kings, princes, political intrigue — and mix that with monsters and ogres and giants."

Long story short, he quips, he's looking to write an African "Game of Thrones."

maggie.galehouse@chron.com



Author Marlon James

Jeffrey Skemp

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