ForeWord Reviews

LITERARY

John Crow's Devil
Marlon James
Akashic Books
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This is an astounding book—in verbal pyrotechnics, but also in the fact that it's a softcover re-issue. How could such a rich fictional brew have come and gone with so little fanfare?

John Crow's Devil tells the story of the Rum Preacher and the Apostle York, two sides of the same coin: one is out "to preach about forgiveness" and the other bent on "tearing down the kingdom of Satan" in the town of Gibbeah, Jamaica, a setting which provides Marlon James ample opportunity to delve into the intricate minds and lives of its people.

Working in the vernacular and invoking the mighty themes of sin and salvation, disgrace and redemption, the author makes "the Preacher and the Apostle's battle a clash between Heaven and Hell." And as those in Gibbeah realize, "only One will reign supreme here."

Who that will be forms the crux of the story. The interloper, Lucas York (the Apostle), has turned the congregation away from its present pastor, a drunk named Hector Bligh (the Rum Preacher) who on the surface seems the more sinful of the two. Much of the story is told through the eyes of two women who "found themselves compelled by men they barely understood." Lucinda can't help lusting after the strapping young Apostle; and Mary, a widow, takes in the Rum Preacher out of bitter compassion after he's booted out of church by the silver-tongued Apostle.

As if this isn't trouble enough, the author mixes in the ancient black arts of *obedah* with the fabled teachings of Christianity: "The Lord goin send signs and wonders," they say, waiting to see who will prevail. The book is laden with symbolism, from the John Crows (vultures, or demons) of the title to calves with their heads on backwards to serpents below the belt.

The novel is carried forward on torrents of dialect. At times comical, at others nonsensical, the local patter is a revelation of character: "Everybody raasclaat sorry, but is not everybody have to clean up people mess. Your God coming soon? Cause if him coming right now I giving him a damn mop!" It's also a match for the rhetorical heights of the Apostle with his sly fire-and-brimstone homilies and turns of phrase: "I can only minister against the sinister."

A finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, this first novel is provocative and

shocking, full of imaginative vim and stylistic vigor. While not without flaws, among them forsaking a hero worthy of redemption, *John Crow's Devil* deserves to be read by anyone interested in powerful storytelling at its best.

Trina Carter