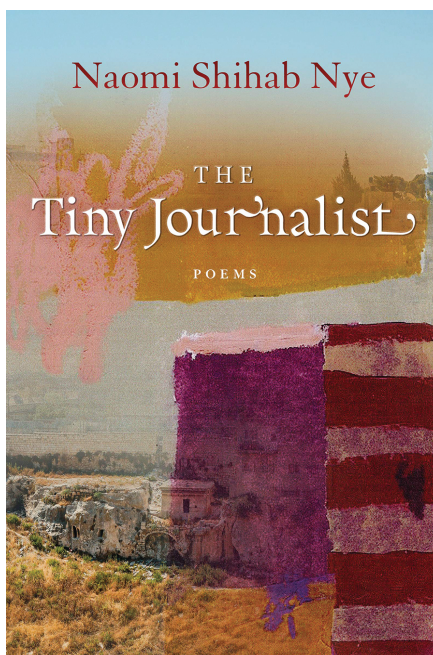


## Books in Review

characters who dreamed of migrating to the United States in some way, shape, or form. *The Other Americans* follows up on those dreams and gives nuance to previously articulated depictions of migration to America. Additionally, although the plotline of the text is fictitious, elements of Lalami's nonfiction work (e.g., her New York Times essay "What Does It Take to 'Assimilate' in America?") are readily discernible in the story arc she creates throughout the novel.

Overall, *The Other Americans* is a thrill to read. It theorizes the "American Dream" by putting it into conversation with racial and socioeconomic categories. It questions the role of family loyalty. It introduces us to the struggles of Americans on the margins, and it wraps everything up neatly around the story's pivotal moment: an accident that



may or may not have been a crime. Lalami's finely tuned analysis of contemporary America is insightful and, at times, biting in its critique.

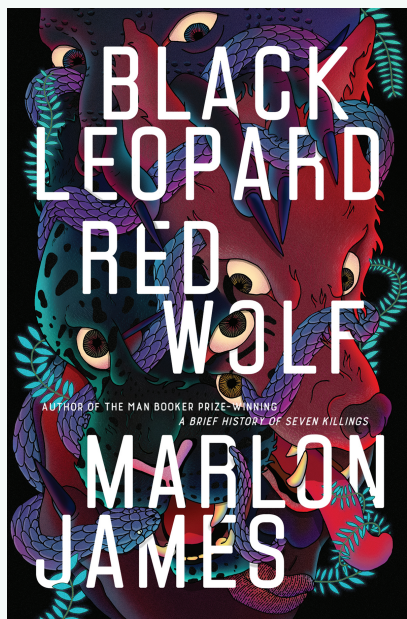
Jocelyn Frelier  
Sam Houston State University

Naomi Shihab Nye  
*The Tiny Journalist*

Rochester, New York. BOA Editions. 2019.  
128 pages.

Whether a product of the twenty-four-hour news cycle or an ancient survival mechanism, it is exceedingly easy for us to cordon ourselves off from the suffering of others. Before reading *The Tiny Journalist*, I was thoroughly cordoned off from the Israeli-

### MARLON JAMES



Marlon James  
*Black Leopard, Red Wolf*

New York. Riverhead Books. 2019.  
640 pages.

Fantasy, as we're familiar with it in the global genre market, is a primarily Western-centric affair shaped by the writing of white men with many initials—J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, G. R. R. Martin—

and circulated further through successful film and TV adaptations. (China, too, is a major player in fantasy, but its texts have had little influence outside the sinophone world.) Decades of arguments about what constitutes fantasy aside, there is no doubt that fantasy is a matter of great importance to world literature and culture and that fantasy from the postcolonial world has tended to be received in the literary market under the name "magical realism." Jamaican writer Marlon James's *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is not magical realism.

Winner of the 2015 Man Booker Prize for his historical novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (about Jamaica, reggae, and the geopolitics of crack in the 1970s–1990s), James has written a work of epic fantasy that draws on African stories and traditions, on the textual and material worlds of sub-Saharan Africa, and on a century of literary, generic, and popular-cultural influences to bring a bold, violent, and challenging world to life. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* tells the six-hundred-plus-page story of Tracker and his search for a missing child with a company of adventurers (friendly and otherwise), including the werecat Leopard, the giant Sadogo, and the witch Sogolon.

In response to James's "experiment" slumming with epic fantasy, critics have repeatedly (and happily) cited similarities with Tolkien, Martin, and Robert E. Howard (creator of pulp fantasy hero Conan) and noted that James brings his literary flare for experimentation, poetic language, and the vulgar grittiness of reality to their fantasy worlds. They aren't wrong, but the discourse is telling. James's success setting the literary world abuzz about a fantasy novel, of all things, suggests what many have long known: in some ways, the old boundaries between genre and literature have become more fluid; in others, they have become more rigid. Repeated comparisons to Tolkien, Martin, and Howard betray a shallow understanding of contemporary fantasy and ignore the lengthy history of Afrofantasy that has run parallel to the now-popular Afrofuturism.

What's more, James's novel fits best with the hope-effacing tone of grimdark, though even there it is somewhat out of place, proffering a sly, self-besmirching nihilism in place of grimdark's typically bleak one. In this fantastic Africa, Tracker and Leopard at times seriously proclaim, and occasionally mock, their shared motto that

Palestinian conflict; such a complicated issue, so burdened by history and belief, where to even start? While Naomi Shihab Nye's newest book of poetry offers no easy answers, its questions push well beyond the margin of the pages. What happens when we're reminded not just of human rights injustices but of the quotidian moments in the lives of those affected? Reminded that they too live in this very modern world, with wants and needs as expansive and equally as simple as our own?

The daughter of a Palestinian immigrant to the US, Shihab Nye transports readers to a world in which she must often live, where the daily realities of Palestine and the US are nestled intimately close together. The beginning of "Separation Wall" could easily be a call to action in either place: "When the

milk is sour, / it separates. // The next time you stop speaking, / ask yourself why you were born."

Bringing what is as concrete, known, and essential as milk into the harsh language of resistance, the lines compel us to recognize the privilege of silence afforded by distance. Startled spaces like this created between the poems and the world continue to echo for me; a volley of fresh, visual metaphors spoken on behalf of those who have often been most powerless in the face of violence.

Janna Jihad Ayyad—a self-proclaimed journalist at the age of seven and a child of Palestine—is both the book's namesake and its "unburdened alphabet." Throughout the work, and often through Janna's own words, Shihab Nye exalts the wisdom and uncluttered hope of children and of imagination.

"nothing means nothing, and no one loves no one." Only, in the language of James's novel, nothing and no one are not negations of *something* and *someone* but rather things unto themselves. Tracker and Leopard trade this motto, use it as proof of life's grimness, but also know that it is ultimately tautological and self-referential: no one, a man without a name, loves no one—either himself, or another man without a name, another no one.

If Tolkien set out to create a mythology for modern Britain (though it already had one), James has done the same for the African diaspora. Or perhaps it's better to say that he has taken the cultural, linguistic, and textual influences of Africa and of black peoples' experiences in the diaspora and shaped a world of fantasy that shies away from the ideological one-sidedness of earlier, similar attempts at writing "African" fantasy in the diaspora. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is thus entirely unlike Charles Saunders's *Imaro* (1981) and the resulting "sword and soul" literary movement, which translated the ideological values of Howard's Conan, particularly of masculinity, into the stories of griots. In James's novel, rather, Tracker is the griot, not its mythologized subject. But

he is unreliable, and his first-person testimony to the reader meanders across his personal history, lingers where he pleases, and refuses to conform to "our" world. James, here, might then best be compared to N. K. Jemisin, Nalo Hopkinson, Kameron Hurley, and Jack Kirby.

As in his earlier novels, James extends his stories beyond mere narrative to capture the breadth of his world, which draws as much on the great African works of oral poetry, the Songhay *Epic of Askia Muhammad* and Malinke *Epic of Sundiata*, and on African fantasy like D. O. Fagunwa's *Forest of a Thousand Demons* (1938) as it does on the influence of Western fantasy. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* sprawls across its imaginary Africa and the timeline of Tracker's life, enworlding the reader, who is expected to learn this world's ways, to parse the African or African-inspired names of objects, concepts, places, people. It is the kind of book that will no doubt inspire online concordances and spark decades of source-text study, as Tolkien's *Legendarium* did. But it is its own beast, and I am happy to have met it.

Sean Guynes

Michigan State University

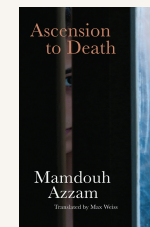


Rae Armantrout

*Wobble*

Wesleyan University Press

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and California native Rae Armantrout's provocative collection of poetry, *Wobble*, was a nominee for the 2018 National Book Awards and is further evidence that Armantrout continually proves herself to be a keen observer of not only the reality of life but also society's shortcomings. To Armantrout, separating reality from narrative is essential to understanding, and *Wobble* isolates American life, revealing the desolate truth of the tumultuous world we in which we live.



Mamdouh Azzam

*Ascension to Death*

Trans. Max Weiss

Haus

One of the most beloved novels in modern Syrian history, Mamdouh Azzam's *Ascension to Death* is a powerfully raw, emotionally charged narrative of a young woman's efforts to escape her life of oppression and torment in favor of freedom and love. The first of Azzam's novels to be published in English, *Ascension to Death* explores the horrific crevasses in which the worst of human nature festers while simultaneously revealing the love that serves as the ultimate reprieve from darkness.