

James Baldwin

Baldwin, James



Record Information

Source: Library of Congress. Prints and Photographs Division.

Record Type: Photograph or Illustration

Date: b. 1924–d. 1987

Description:

James Arthur Baldwin was born in New York City and spent his childhood in Harlem. His experiences as a teenage preacher were reflected in his widely acclaimed first novel, *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1953). He moved to Paris in 1948, where he wrote a collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), and his second novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1966). Baldwin bitterly and passionately explored the racism between black and white Americans in *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), *Another Country* (1962), *The Fire Next Time* (1963), and *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964). He continued to write and publish throughout his life, and died in France.

Among African-American writers and social leaders of the 20th century, perhaps none have articulated the painful legacy of slavery and racism in modern America better than **James Baldwin**. An internationally acclaimed author of essays, novels, plays, and poetry, **Baldwin** is best known for his eloquent and finely crafted essays and his autobiographical novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953). **Baldwin**'s writings reshaped the language of racial protest during the 1950s and 1960s and have continued to inspire generations of black authors and activists.

James Arthur **Baldwin** was born on August 2, 1924, to Berdis Emma Jones, who delivered him out of wedlock at Harlem Hospital in New York. **Baldwin**'s mother later married David **Baldwin**, a factory worker and puritanical lay preacher in a storefront church in Harlem, whom **Baldwin** described as "certainly the most bitter man I have ever met." **Baldwin**'s childhood in Harlem was characterized by poverty, racism, and resentment by his stepfather, whose physical and psychological abuse shattered the boy's self-esteem.

As a student at Public School 24 in Harlem, **Baldwin** soon impressed his teachers with his intelligence, and they encouraged him to read and write. He began to frequent the local public library, eventually claiming to have read every one of its books, and developed a passion for film and drama. **Baldwin** attended Frederick Douglass Junior High School and received further encouragement from poet Countee Cullen, a French teacher at the school and founder of its literary club. **Baldwin** edited the school newspaper, the *Douglass Pilot*, to which he also contributed a short story and several essays.

Confronted by the emotional, physical, and sexual turmoil of adolescence, Baldwin retreated into Christianity at the age of 14 and became a youth minister at the Fireside Pentecostal Assembly. Having suspended his growing literary ambitions, Baldwin devoted himself passionately to the church, earning from his congregations the respect and support that had been missing in his home life. By age 17, Baldwin had become disenchanted with the church, which he perceived as stifling his creative and intellectual development. He would later claim that "whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being ... must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church," a position that was influenced in large part by the attitudes and actions of his stepfather. Baldwin attended DeWitt Clinton High School and served as editor in chief of the school newspaper, the *Magpie*, which published three of his short stories. Following his graduation in 1942, Baldwin found work with a construction company and held several other odd jobs to help support his family. He was also influenced during this period by his friendship with Beauford Delaney, a Greenwich Village artist who remained a mentor and father figure until Delaney's death in 1979.

After the death of his stepfather in 1943, Baldwin moved to Greenwich Village and devoted himself more fully to his writing. He began work on a novel and made the acquaintance of novelist Richard Wright, who recommended Baldwin for a Eugene Saxton Fellowship, which was awarded in 1945. Baldwin published his first professional writing, a review of Maxim Gorky's *Best Short Stories*, in the *Nation* in 1947. His first essay, "The Harlem Ghetto," appeared in *Commonwealth* the following year. By 1948 Baldwin could no longer tolerate the racial bigotry that he had suffered for most of his life. With the help of a Rosenwald Fellowship, he sailed for Europe, where he felt that he could live and write more freely. His departure from the United States also signaled a shift in his personal life. He cancelled plans for an impending marriage and from that time forward embraced his homosexuality personally and publicly. Except for brief periods of travel throughout Europe and Africa and visits to the United States as a lecturer and civil rights activist, Baldwin spent the remainder of his life in France. In 1953 he published his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Set primarily in a storefront church, the novel captures in painful and compelling detail many of Baldwin's experiences as an adolescent, in the church and in his stepfather's home. "It was an attempt to exorcise something," Baldwin explained about his writing of the novel, "to find out what happened to my father, what happened to all of us." The success of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, which has remained one of his most widely acclaimed works, established Baldwin as a major American author. His next work, the play *The Amen Corner*, also focused on his early life, in particular his relationship to his stepfather, and serves as a powerful indictment of the church and its role in the lives of African Americans. Baldwin described his main character, Sister Margaret, in this way: "Her sense of reality is dictated by the society's assumption, which also becomes her own, of her inferiority. Her need for human affirmation, and also for vengeance, expresses itself in her merciless piety."

Though produced by Owen Dodson in 1955 as a student production at Howard University, Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* would not reach Broadway until 1965, when it

opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. It remains one of his most frequently produced dramatic works. Baldwin's other plays include *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), *One Day, When I Was Lost: A Scenario Based on the Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1972), and *A Deed from the King of Spain* (1974).

Baldwin published his second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, in 1956. The novel depicts a brief but intense love affair between a white American tourist, David, and a bartender, Giovanni, whom David meets in Paris while awaiting the arrival of his fiancée. David eventually denies his homosexuality and abandons Giovanni, whose life is ultimately destroyed by the loss. "It is not so much about homosexuality," Baldwin said of the novel, "it is what happens if you are so afraid that you finally cannot love anybody." *Giovanni's Room*, which was later adapted for the stage, received generally positive reviews upon its publication and has since come to hold an important place in

African-American and gay and lesbian literature.

Over the next several years, Baldwin published five more novels: *Another Country* (1962), *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), *Just above My Head* (1979), which earned an American Book Award nomination, and *Harlem Quartet* (1987). Though regarded favorably by many critics, particularly for their autobiographical content and their explication of America's impoverished perspectives on racial and sexual identity, Baldwin's novels never matched the widespread critical and popular success of his essays. *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), Baldwin's first essay collection, included works previously published in numerous magazines and literary journals and marked the inception of his reputation as a leading American essayist. Some of the included essays, particularly "Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Many Thousands Gone," also brought controversy. His critique of racial stereotypes in American literature, which included an examination of difficulties he identified in Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* (1940), led to a falling out with Wright, who had been a mentor and friend of many years.

Baldwin's most celebrated collection of essays, *The Fire Next Time*, was published in 1963 and reflected a maturity in his themes and tone. "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation," the first of two essays in the collection, is a lengthy epistle addressed to his nephew, James, in which Baldwin explains how racism has shaped his personal and family life. Baldwin exhorts his young namesake to remain free of racial bigotry and to help make America "what America must become." In his second essay, "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind," Baldwin continues to explore the nature of American racism and warns that continued racial oppression will inevitably lead to violence. A landmark work in its passionate articulation of the causes and conditions of racial strife in America, *The Fire Next Time* has come to be regarded as one of Baldwin's most powerful works. His other collections of essays include *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (1961), *No Name in the Street* (1972), *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985), and *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948–1985* (1985). Baldwin also collaborated on the publication of two dialogues, *A Rap on Race* (1971, with anthropologist Margaret Mead) and *A Dialogue* (1973, with poet Nikki Giovanni).

After more than 10 years in Europe, Baldwin returned to the United States in 1957 and toured the South to witness the violence and oppression that African Americans suffered in their fight for civil rights. His experiences during this period and during his return in the 1960s formed the basis of numerous essays and lectures. Though Baldwin was not a central figure in the movement for civil rights, his growing reputation as a writer brought added visibility to the struggle.

In addition to essays, plays, and novels, Baldwin produced an acclaimed body of short fiction, published throughout his early career and collected in *Going to Meet the Man* (1965). "Sonny's Blues," Baldwin's most famous short story, is set against the economic hardships and rampant racism of life in Harlem during the 1940s and 1950s, and depicts the turbulent relationship between two brothers, whose individual characters and perspectives create divisions between them, but who ultimately learn to accept each other.

The murders of three friends, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, during the 1960s led to Baldwin's further despair at American institutionalized racism and precluded any hope of a permanent return from abroad. In the late 1970s and 1980s, Baldwin accepted several teaching appointments that included short stints at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Bowling Green State University, Mount Holyoke College, and the University of California at Berkeley. James Arthur Baldwin died of cancer on November 30, 1987 (some sources say December 1), at his home in St. Paul de Vence in southern France. One of the 20th century's most eloquent and influential voices for racial justice, James Baldwin provided an intensely personal perspective on the legacy of hatred and oppression in the lives of African Americans. His assertion that "all art is a kind of confession" informs all of his literary work. In recognition of his considerable achievements in literature, and as a testament to France's regard for him as an honorary citizen, the French government designated James Baldwin a commander of the Legion of Honor in 1986.

References and Further Information

Bloom, Harold, ed. *James Baldwin*. New York: Chelsea House, 2007.
Boyd, Herb. *Baldwin's Harlem: A Biography of James Baldwin*. New York: Atria Books, 2008.

Campbell, James. *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

Miller, D. Quentin, ed. *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen*. Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 2000.