

INTRODUCTION



James Baldwin

(1924-1987)

From the immediate critical success of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, James Baldwin's writings have been well received by the intellectual community, but his fiction, which deals frankly and sympathetically with controversial issues such as civil rights and homosexuality, did not immediately win popular approval. In fact, not until the 1974 publication of *If Beale Street Could Talk* did Baldwin make the best-seller list. In the meantime, this extraordinary man had won awards ranging from a Rosenwald Fellowship in 1948 to a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1954 to election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1964.

Born out of wedlock in Harlem, James Baldwin was the eldest of nine children, a fact that forced him to shoulder much of the day-to-day responsibility for his half brothers and sisters. In addition, his relationship with David Baldwin, his stepfather, was ambivalent at best. A carpenter and storefront preacher, David Baldwin intended to be both a good husband to Baldwin's mother and a real father to young James. Yet Baldwin and his stepfather were never comfortable together, and home became an unbearable place for James, though his baby-sitting responsibilities required him to stay there most of the time.

Young Baldwin fared little better outside the home, where his intellectualism and his physical unattractiveness alienated him from his peers and his blackness alienated him from the rest of society. Baldwin, therefore, turned inward for refuge, first to reading and then to writing. Though writing was not to be an easy escape, Baldwin soon realized that it was his only chance to get himself and his family out of the ghetto. Early aid from Richard Wright helped him secure a Eugene F. Saxton Memorial Award in 1945, and Baldwin also began placing essays in *The Nation*, *The New Leader*, and *Commentary*. By 1948 he had gained enough recognition to win a Rosenwald Fellowship, which allowed him to escape to France, where he worked on his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

Go Tell It on the Mountain, set in the 1930's, deals with the dead-end existence of Harlem blacks. The novel tells the story of four people whose lives center on the Temple of the Fire Baptized, a storefront church like the one in which David Baldwin preached. The characters are desperate to change their fates, to escape Harlem's limitations. Yet the available escapes seem worse than the conditions under which the characters live: Sex is a pleasant but temporary respite, drugs and alcohol relieve the symptoms but impoverish and finally kill their users, and stepping across the line into the white world is the most dangerous of all. Religion, says preacher Gabriel Grimes, provides the only real escape, but through the prayers of the adolescent John Grimes's mother, stepfather, and aunt, Baldwin demonstrates that, ironically, religion may be the worst escape these characters could choose. Adherence to its values assures a long life, but a long life only prolongs their suffering.

Throughout this and his other novels, Baldwin probes the basic theme of isolation. His characters strive to establish an identity and to participate in activities that connect them with others. Society, however,

keeps their lives fragmented and meaningless, and the racial stereotypes with which society labels these characters serve to deny them an individual identity by forcing a group identity on them. If "all blacks are alike," then there can be no individual identity.

Sexuality, though it provides no escape, is nevertheless one way Baldwin's characters fight against society's impersonalizing pressures. In Baldwin's works, sex, whether heterosexual or homosexual, is a way to assert one's personhood and to establish individual, personal contact with an other. Baldwin skirts this issue in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, but he deals with it directly in the controversial *Giovanni's Room* and expands that treatment to its fullest in *Another Country*. There, Baldwin deplores the white culture, whose emphasis on success at any price alienates people by forcing them to compete against one another and by demanding that they conform to a cultural norm, an act that also forces them to deny their own identities. Within this context, sexual contact, whether with a person of the same or the opposite sex, the same or another race, the same or a different class, forces people to expose themselves, to get close to someone, to become vulnerable. Out of such moments, some, but by no means all, of Baldwin's characters manage to build a whole life for themselves, a kind of refuge from the spite and the struggle of so-called normal society.

Baldwin's heroes, therefore, are heroes because they succeed on a personal level, not because they bring about sweeping social change. In fact, in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, Baldwin uses Leo Proudhammer, an actor and civil rights activist, to demonstrate that it is these small successes that really matter, that if they are sustained, they eventually accumulate into a more powerful change than any one individual can bring. Thus, throughout his career, James Baldwin has concentrated on individuals, allowing the social relevance in his novels to emerge as a result of the problems of his characters, rather than building his characters around a social issue. The result is a convincing, humane body of literature.

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