

James Baldwin
1924-1987

James Baldwin was born in Harlem, New York. Baldwin was the oldest of nine children, and because he was usually responsible for the care of his younger siblings, he could often be found with a baby in one hand and a book in the other ("James Baldwin." In Donald T Hollenbeck). Raised by his preacher stepfather in an atmosphere of fear and religious fanaticism, Baldwin joined the Holy Rollers and was delighted when his preaching drew larger crowds than his stepfather. He preached for 3 years until "his faith was gone" ("James Baldwin." In Donald T Hollenbeck). After high school Baldwin worked many odd jobs to help support his family, and wrote in the evenings. When his father died in 1943 he pursued writing full time, made possible after he met the author Richard Wright and received a writing fellowship. He moved to Paris after receiving another fellowship, and there he wrote his first three books.

Considered "one of the 20th century's greatest writers, Baldwin broke new literary ground with the exploration of racial and social issues in his many works" (James Baldwin." Biography.com). His first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, published in 1952, is autobiographical, and deals primarily with his youth. He visited the South for the first time around 1957, and became interested in the civil rights movement. In 1963 there was a noted change in Baldwin's work with *The Fire Next Time*. This collection of essays was meant to educate white Americans on what it meant to be black. It also offered white readers a view of themselves through the eyes of the African-American community. In the work, Baldwin offered a brutally realistic picture of race relations, but he remained hopeful about possible improvements. 'If we...do not falter in our duty now, we may be able...to end the racial nightmare.' His words struck a chord with the American people, and *The Fire Next Time* sold more than a million copies" ("James Baldwin." Biography.com). "That same year, Baldwin was feature on the cover of *Time* magazine. 'There is not another writer—white or black—who expresses with such poignancy and abrasiveness the dark realities of the racial ferment in North and South,' *Time* said in the feature ("About the Author").

He was criticized for being a pacifist, but considered Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X friends. After their assassinations he returned to France where he wrote *If Beale Street Could Talk* in which he was accused of bitterness, "but even though Baldwin had encapsulated much of the anger of the times in his book, he always remained a constant advocate for universal love and brotherhood" ("About the Author").

"About the Author." PBS. PBS, 29 Nov. 2006. Web. 09 Jan. 2017.

<<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/james-baldwin-about-the-author/59/>>.

"James Baldwin." *Biography.com*. A&E Networks Television, 11 Dec. 2014. Web. 09 Jan. 2017.

<<http://www.biography.com/people/james-baldwin-9196635#synopsis>>.

"James Baldwin." In Donald T. Hollenbeck and Julie West Johnson eds., *Literature*. Evanston, IL: McDougal, 1984.

“A Letter to My Nephew”

This letter was later incorporated into one of Baldwin’s most famous essays, “The Fire Next Time.” The format, a letter to Baldwin’s nephew, was imitated by Ta-Nehisi Coates in his best-selling book *Between the World and Me*, published in 2015.

<http://www.progressive.org/news/2014/12/5047/letter-my-nephew>