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## James Baldwin

James Arthur Baldwin, author of the novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), wrote about the effects of race, religion, and sexuality on personal identity. In numerous essays, he articulated a deep moral concern about the effects of racism, not only on African Americans, but on whites, their society, and culture.

Baldwin was born in Harlem, New York on August 2, 1924 and raised by his mother, Berdis, and stepfather, David, a storefront preacher. At the age of 14, even as he began to write with the encouragement of several of his teachers, he preached in various Harlem churches, gaining the reputation of a prodigy. In 1942, Baldwin left home and the church for Greenwich Village, where he held a succession of odd jobs while he wrote essays and reviews, a few of which were published in New York journals. In 1948, he moved to Paris, where he settled for a decade.

*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin's first novel, is the story of 14-year-old John Grimes and his salvation in a Pentecostal church. John is confused by his emerging sexuality, by his ambivalent feelings toward his father, and by his anger toward whites. While he experiences a rebirth in his father's church, he still must choose whether and how to face the impoverished world outside its walls.

In 1955, Baldwin published *Notes of a Native Son*, a collection of essays that had appeared in such magazines as *Commentary* and *Partisan Review*. Its subjects ranged from the protest novel to interracial encounters in Europe, and Baldwin emerged as a prominent African-American spokesperson. "I'm only black if you think you're white," he wrote. In his novel *Giovanni's Room* (1956), Baldwin explored the complexities of love and sex between men and women, and men and other men.

In 1957, Baldwin returned from Paris, feeling that he should use his growing fame to further the cause of the American civil rights movement. A trip to the South that year provided the material for the title essay in *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), a collection of writings on "the question of color" and the artist's role in a racist society.

The best-selling novel *Another Country* (1962) depicts racial and sexual tensions among a circle of friends coping with life amid the poverty and violence of New York City. *The Fire Next Time* (1963) includes two essays, both in the form of letters. Baldwin recalls his own experience as a preacher in Harlem and examines the movement created by the Black Muslims, warning of the pent-up rage of African Americans. He wrote, "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, no more water, the fire next time." The book confirmed Baldwin's place as a leading advocate for civil rights, and for two years, he traveled, preaching his new gospel.

In 1964, Baldwin's *Blues for Mr. Charlie* opened on Broadway. The drama addressed the contrasting approaches to the civil rights struggle taken by the nonviolent activist Martin Luther King Jr. and the black militant Malcolm X.

*Going to Meet the Man* (1965) contains eight short stories. The title story studies the moral and sociological roots of racism by examining the violent behavior of a white sheriff's deputy. *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) follows the career of a famous black actor and observes his searches for meaningful love and an activism that can be effective in fostering social change.

Among Baldwin's subsequent works were dialogues on race with the anthropologist Margaret Mead and the African-American poet Nikki Giovanni; an autobiographical essay, *No Name in the Street* (1972); the novel *If Beale*

*Street Could Talk* (1974), about a young Harlem couple's struggle against racism; and a children's book about growing up black, *Little Man, Little Man* (1976). His last novel, *Just Above My Head* (1979), describes the efforts of an African-American musician to cope with his homosexuality and the demands of his art in a racist environment.

Suffering from ill health, Baldwin nevertheless managed to lecture at several colleges in the 1980s and to write *Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985), about a series of child murders in Atlanta, as well as to collect a book each of his poetry and essays. He died of cancer in France on December 1, 1987.

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**FURTHER READING**

Campbell, James, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin*, 1991; Weatherby, William J., *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire*, 1989.

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