

# Baldwin, James (Arthur)



James Baldwin

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(b. Aug. 2, 1924, New York City--d. Dec. 1, 1987, Saint-Paul, Fr.), American essayist, novelist, and playwright whose eloquence and passion on the subject of race in America made him an important voice, particularly in the late 1950s and early 1960s, in the United States and, later, through much of western Europe.

The eldest of nine children, he grew up in poverty in the black ghetto of Harlem in New York City. From 14 to 16 he was active during out-of-school hours as a preacher in a small revivalist church, a period he wrote about in his semiautobiographical first and finest novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), and in his play about a woman evangelist, *The Amen Corner* (performed in New York City, 1965).

After graduation from high school, he began a restless period of ill-paid jobs, self-study, and literary apprenticeship in Greenwich Village, the bohemian quarter of New York City. He left in 1948 for Paris, where he lived for the next eight years. (In later years, from 1969, he became a self-styled "transatlantic commuter," living alternatively in the south of France and in New York and New England.) His second novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1956), deals with the white world and concerns an American in Paris torn between his love for a man and his love for a woman. Between the two novels came a collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955).

In 1957 he returned to the United States and became an active participant in the civil-rights struggle that swept the nation. His book of essays, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), explores black-white relations in the United States. This theme also was central to his novel *Another Country* (1962), which examines sexual as well as racial issues.

*The New Yorker* magazine gave over almost all of its Nov. 17, 1962, issue to a long article by Baldwin on the Black Muslim separatist movement and other aspects of the civil-rights struggle. The article became a best-seller in book form as *The Fire Next Time* (1963). His bitter play about racist oppression, *Blues for Mister Charlie* ("Mister Charlie" being a black term for a white man), played on Broadway to mixed reviews in 1964.

Though Baldwin continued to write until his death--publishing works including *Going to Meet the Man* (1965), a collection of short stories; and the novels *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), and *Just Above My Head* (1979); and *The Price of the Ticket* (1985), a collection of autobiographical writings--none of his later works achieved the popular and critical success of his early work.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY.

Biographical and critical works include Louis H. Pratt, *James Baldwin* (1978); James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (1991); David Leeming, *James Baldwin* (1994); Therman B. O'Daniel (ed.), *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation* (1977); Fred L. Standley and Nancy V. Burt (eds.), *Critical Essays on James Baldwin* (1988); and Horace A. Porter, *Stealing the Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin* (1989).