James Baldwin

Writer

Born August 2, 1924, New York, New York

Died December 1, 1987, St. Paul de Vence, France
"Once I found myself on the other side of the ocean, I could see where I came from very clearly, and I could see that I carried myself, which is my home, with me.... I am the grandson of a slave, and I am a writer. I must deal with both."

A passionate writer on racial matters, James Baldwin was one of the most respected modern American authors. He emerged as a writer in the 1950s, when segregation was still legal, and his fame grew as the civil rights movement developed. In his novels, essays, and poems, Baldwin portrayed the problems faced by African Americans, describing their hopes and disappointments and how they coped in a hostile white society. He saw himself as a "disturber of the peace," revealing truths that many Americans would rather not have known.

In one of his early works, Baldwin pointed out that the much-discussed "negro problem" was in fact a white problem. "I am only black," he wrote, "if you think you're white." This theme ran through his writings, as did his belief that racism was harmful to whites as well as blacks, that it hurt the oppressors as well as the oppressed. Baldwin's works were immensely popular, and he was recognized as a major writer on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

**Gained prestige as a teenage preacher**

James Arthur Baldwin was the eldest of nine children, the son of David and Berdis (Jones) Baldwin. He was raised in Harlem in a family that was desperately poor. The most powerful figure during his childhood was his stepfather, a fiery preacher who held strict religious views and ruled the household with an iron rod. Baldwin did not get on with his stepfather—he felt unloved—and as a form of escape he turned to books (and also to movies and plays, when he could slip away to them without anyone knowing).

As Baldwin entered his teens he began to worry about his sexuality. Later in life he openly accepted his homosexuality, but as a teenager in a strict religious household, he felt horribly sinful and feared that he was depraved. Turning to the church for help, Baldwin was converted by a woman preacher of the Pentecostal faith and became a junior minister at the Fireside Pentecostal Assembly. Baldwin was only fourteen at the time and still in high school, but he proved to be a powerful preacher and gained a great reputation in the Harlem churches. His rousing language and vivid imagery were a foretaste of the skills he would later employ as a writer.

Possibly because Baldwin read so much, he showed a talent for writing at quite a young age. He was encouraged by his teachers, first at Frederick Douglass Junior High School and then at DeWitt Clinton High School, where he was editor of the school magazine. By the time Baldwin graduated from DeWitt in 1942, he no longer considered preaching to be his calling. His wide reading caused him to question Christianity, and he concluded that African Americans should have little to do with a religion that had been used to enslave them.

**Succeeded abroad as a writer**

After leaving school Baldwin worked to support his brothers and sisters. College was out
of the question, because his stepfather was ill and the family was struggling to make ends meet. With World War II underway, Baldwin found work in a Defense Department factory, but he hated the whole experience: the workplace was segregated, and the white workers were unpleasant. When his stepfather died, Baldwin struck out on his own.

He moved to New York’s Greenwich Village, where he started to write seriously and supported himself with whatever odd jobs he could get. In 1944 Baldwin met author Richard Wright, who helped him obtain a Eugene F. Saxton Fellowship, which provided Baldwin with enough money to write full time. In 1948 he sold his first short story, “Previous Condition,” about the difficulties of a young black man trying to live in the white world of Greenwich Village.

Over the next few months Baldwin sold several more short pieces, but the professional encouragement he felt could not overcome the stifling racial situation in the United States. He felt he would never develop fully as a writer unless he were to leave the country, so when he won another fellowship, he set off for Paris, France.

Baldwin’s Parisian years marked an important, prolific period. He settled easily into the intellectual life of the city, getting to know other writers and artists as well as getting to know himself. “Once I found myself on the other side of the ocean,” he told the New York Times, “I could see where I came from very clearly, and I could see that I carried myself, which is my home, with me.... I am the grandson of a slave, and I am a writer. I must deal with both.”

Baldwin dealt with both by producing some magnificent books during the next few years. The storyline in his first novel, Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953), mirrored his own youth—growing up in Harlem and being saved by the Pentecostal church. His first play, “The Amen Corner” (1955), was about a family torn between religion and art and love, and his second novel, Giovanni’s Room (1956), was a homosexual love story set in Paris. All these books took a fresh and honest look at the subject matter, especially problems associated with race, as did the articles and essays Baldwin wrote during this period. Many critics view Baldwin’s essays as his most insightful and brilliant work.

Lectured and wrote best-selling books

Baldwin often visited the United States, and he never gave up his American citizenship.
By the mid-1950s his books had brought him considerable fame at home, and he was welcomed as a speaker on lecture tours. However, his personal success was tinged with bitterness over the continued oppression of black Americans.

Realizing that his books were widely read by whites, Baldwin became a spokesman for the growing civil rights movement, calling on white Americans to stop the oppression and to change their ways before it was too late. He pointed out that African Americans had reached the limit of their patience—they were no longer prepared to suffer meekly. In two nonfiction works, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963), Baldwin warned that black anger could easily erupt into violence (as indeed it did later in the decade). Both books were best-sellers, selling more than a million copies.

Baldwin’s energetic writing and lecturing throughout the United States in the early 1960s also brought him criticism. Black Panther activist Eldridge Cleaver accused Baldwin of “fawning on whites” and hating blacks, and members of the Black Arts Movement felt that as a black writer he should be writing only for and about fellow blacks. However, Baldwin refused to call himself a black writer; he said he was an American writer, concerned with the issues of his multiracial country.

In 1964 Baldwin’s second play, “Blues for Mr. Charlie,” opened on Broadway. Like virtually everything he wrote in this period, it dealt with civil rights issues—in this case, nonviolent protest versus violence. The following year, Baldwin’s earlier play, “The Amen Corner,” also opened on Broadway be-
fore touring overseas. Baldwin joined the tour and then lived for a while in Turkey, where he settled down to do more writing. He returned to America in 1968, living in Hollywood and writing a screenplay for Alex Haley's Autobiography of Malcolm X, then moved to the south of France in the early 1970s, where, except for occasional travel, he lived for the rest of his life.

“This man saved our lives”

The author of seven novels and eight major works of nonfiction, as well as numerous shorter pieces, including his plays and his screenplay, Baldwin succeeded in touching America's conscience, stressing that all people have much in common, whatever their race or sex or color. His efforts encouraged other black writers, such as Orde Coombs, who wrote, “It is not too much to say that this man saved our lives, or at least, gave us the necessary ammunition to face what we knew would continue to be a hostile and condescending world.” At the time of his death, Baldwin was working on a book about Martin Luther King, Jr.