



James Baldwin

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Though James Baldwin is a distinguished novelist and playwright, it can be argued that his most consistently brilliant work is in his essays, with their witty, impassioned, elegant observations on the life and art of his time. Many are autobiographical in whole or part; “One writes out of one thing only—one’s own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give.” Perhaps the most famous of Baldwin’s autobiographical essays is NOTES OF A NATIVE SON (1955), in which he tries to come to terms with his father, the model for Gabriel in GO, TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN (1953), who was embittered by a heritage of racial oppression and took out his frustrations in indescribable cruelty to his family.

Extremely intelligent, James Baldwin continually battled the absurdity of racism that made life miserable for his people purely because of their color, but he was determined not to let hatred embitter his life as it had his father’s. Baldwin found some solace in the blues, in laughter, and in exiling himself to France. The vital factor about Baldwin’s perceptions is that he was triply an outsider, as an African American, a homosexual, and an expatriate. When asked whether he felt handicapped by being black and gay, he answered, “No, man, I thought I hit the jackpot.” Baldwin returned to the United States to become a leader in the civil rights movement, and his THE FIRE NEXT TIME (1963) is a powerful argument against racism and for full equality for blacks. In NOBODY KNOWS MY NAME: MORE NOTES OF A NATIVE SON (1961), he investigates questions of identity and democracy, “what it means to be an American.” THE DEVIL FINDS WORK (1976) analyzes movies that he saw as a boy and later ones of interest for their treatment of race and politics; many other essays deal with literature—the work of Shakespeare, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, William Faulkner, Norman Mailer, and others. Baldwin followed Henry James’ advice to be the sort of person upon whom nothing is lost, and the abundance of his interests is reflected in the keen observations, wit, and vitality of his essays.

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