A CRITIC AT LARGE

THE LIVES AND LOVES OF JAMES BALDWIN

An older generation dismissed him as passé; a newer one has recast him as a secular saint. But Baldwin's true message remains more unsettling than either camp recognizes.

By **Louis Menand**

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Baldwin photographed in 1963 with Lucien Happersberger—"the one true love story of my life," Baldwin maintained. Alongside the public crusade for civil rights, there was always a private search for a secure, loving relationship. His thesis about our fear of love linked the two. Photograph by Mario Jorrin / Michael Ochs Archives / Getty

An interviewer once asked James Baldwin if he'd ever write something without a message. "No writer who ever lived," Baldwin said, "could have written a line without a message." This is true. People write because they have something to say. Baldwin had something to say, and he spent his life saying it. But many who thought they got his message didn't get it at all.

Baldwin was high-strung and emotionally labile. He wasn't exactly charismatic—there was a strangeness about him which he did nothing to conceal—but he was magnetic. The poet Richard Howard described him as a "rather silly, giddy, predatory fellow who was extremely unattractive-looking. There's a famous eighteenth-century person who used to say, 'I can talk my face away in twenty minutes.' And Jimmy could do that." He put his hands on you. He looked you in the eye. He poured you another drink. When he gave a lecture, he held the room. He had been a preacher when he was very young, and he knew how to work a congregation.

He could charm, he could engage, and he could also rant. Some people who knew him thought that the ranting was an act, and to some extent it was: it was a calculated way of making a point. He spent the winter of 1961 living in the guesthouse of the novelist William Styron, in Connecticut, while he worked on a novel. "We'd feed him," Styron remembered, "and he'd come around at night. We'd have these very liberal political people over, and Jimmy . . . used to stand in front

of the fireplace and say, 'Baby, we're going to burn your motherfucking houses down.' "The liberals no doubt loved it. As he no doubt knew they would.

Baldwin did not follow a healthy or a domestically stable life style. He chain-smoked, wrote all night, and drank his way through countless bottles of Johnnie Walker Scotch. He believed in family. He was close to his own, and toward the end of his life he said that not having children was his only regret. But he had numerous casual liaisons, several unrequited crushes, and a few long-term love affairs, all of which ended unhappily. He tried to kill himself at least three times.

Most of his journalism and all his books were published by white editors who did not always share his ideas on race relations. He was naturally fearful, but he was on the road and out in public during a time when people like him, including people he knew, were getting shot. Putting his message out took an enormous physical and psychic toll.

That message was simple. We're afraid of love, because we're afraid of exposing our true selves. To manage that fear, we invent meaningless categories—Black, white, homosexual, heterosexual—and "other" the groups we don't belong to in order to avoid a reckoning with ourselves. In America, this manifests as "the race problem." Until white Americans—or Americans who "think they are white," as Baldwin sometimes put it—stop posing as innocents and confront who they are, until the country faces its history, until white people learn to love, there will never be genuine equality.

That's pretty much all that Baldwin ever said, and he said it over and over in almost every essay, every book, every speech, and every interview. He had no interest in politics in the usual sense; he wasn't interested in social programs, or civil-rights laws, or the equal-protection clause. If you asked his opinion on those things, he'd politely (usually) change the subject. He was quick, always ready with an answer, and it was always the same answer. William F. Buckley, Jr., was a champion debater at Yale, and fancied himself a forensic maestro; in a famous debate at the Cambridge Union in 1965, Baldwin clobbered him. He carried the room.

But what even sympathetic audiences often failed to grasp—misled, perhaps, by Baldwin's sermonic style—was that his message wasn't just hortatory. He meant it literally. He didn't believe in reform; he believed in revolution. Anything less than a total social reckoning—a complete psychological makeover of white America—was worthless.

This is end-of-days talk. If a total makeover is your goal, then everything is going to fall short. In 1984, reflecting on a career that began in the nineteen-forties, Baldwin judged that although there had been "superficial" changes in race relations, "morally there has been no change at all, and a moral change is the only real one. . . . What has happened, in the time of my time, is the record of my ancestors. No promise was kept with them, no promise was kept with me, nor can

I counsel those coming after me, nor my global kinsmen, to believe a word uttered by my morally bankrupt and desperately dishonest countrymen."

Three years later, he was dead. He was only sixty-three, but he had long since lost his readership. In 1976, the *Times*' daily book critic Christopher Lehmann-Haupt opened a review, "So James Baldwin is still here, still pursuing us, a ghost of 60's past." Three years before that, the young Henry Louis Gates, Jr., had travelled to France to interview Baldwin for *Time*. When Gates filed the piece, editors told him the magazine wasn't interested; Baldwin was "passé." Just a decade earlier, he'd been on the cover. Even Gates, who'd once found Baldwin inspirational, came to believe that, in trying to keep up with the times, Baldwin had given up his critical independence. He had become an echo. He no longer mattered.

Yet today Baldwin is an icon. He has acquired an aura of infallibility, and critical independence is precisely what he stands for. People who once wrote him off have pivoted. And, if you ask college students now what Black American author they want to read, they don't say Toni Morrison. They say James Baldwin. What happened?

The consensus formed early that Baldwin, who broke through with his first two novels, "Go Tell It on the Mountain" (1953) and "Giovanni's Room" (1956), and the essay collections "Notes of a Native Son" (1955) and "Nobody Knows My Name" (1961), was a better essayist than novelist. The novels have their moments, but they have the humorless and fatalistic quality of literary naturalism. They are not books you are eager to get back to. Truman Capote, in a letter to a friend, called Baldwin's fiction "crudely written and of balls-aching boredom." Compared with much literary fiction of the time—"Invisible Man," "The Adventures of Augie March," "On the Road," "Lolita," "The Catcher in the Rye," "Rabbit, Run"—Baldwin's novels are less formally adventurous and far less entertaining.

Still, the early ones were well received. “Giovanni’s Room”—though it’s the story of a love affair between two men, a risqué topic for fiction in 1956—was a critical success, at least among white reviewers. It sold briskly and was a National Book Award finalist. Maybe setting it in Paris made it seem exotic rather than prurient.

The scope of those early novels was narrow, though, and the stories were not anchored in current events. It was with the essay collections that Baldwin caught a wave. The Montgomery bus boycott began in 1955, the battles over school desegregation in 1956, the Southern lunch-counter sit-ins in 1960, the Freedom Rides in 1961. There was something happening here, and, for many white readers, Baldwin was the unfiltered voice of Black experience. He told it like it was.

This is the historical moment—what has been called the “classic phase” of the civil-rights movement, from Brown v. Board of Education, in 1954, to the Voting Rights Act of 1965—that Baldwin will forever be a part of. It was a time when a book could make a difference: “The Feminine Mystique,” “Silent Spring,” “The Other America.” Baldwin’s contribution was “The Fire Next Time.” It made a bigger difference than most people think.

Baldwin’s nonfiction is first-person and autobiographical. That was how he established his authority as a “witness” (the term he preferred) to American race relations. He had walked those mean streets. In Harlem, where he was born, and Greenwich Village, where he moved at nineteen, he had known poverty, police

brutality, sexual assault, and racial discrimination. He had fled the country, going to Paris in 1948, when he was twenty-four. He did not return until 1957.

Even then, he was semi-expatriated. From 1961 on, he spent more and more time in Istanbul, although he was often in the United States speaking on behalf of the civil-rights movement. The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968, basically ended that, and in 1970 Baldwin moved to Saint-Paul de Vence, in the South of France, where he lived for the rest of his life. This man who wrote obsessively about America spent half his life elsewhere.

It's a life appealing to biographers, full of historical incidents and famous names, and featuring a complex, quotable, and slightly otherworldly human being. The first Baldwin biography, "The Furious Passage of James Baldwin," by Fern Marja Eckman, a reporter at the New York *Post*, came out in 1966, when its subject was only forty-two. There have been a number since, including, most recently, Douglas Field's "All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin" (2015), Bill V. Mullen's "James Baldwin: Living in Fire" (2019), and now Nicholas Boggs's "Baldwin: A Love Story" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).

There will be more. In 2017, Baldwin's papers were acquired by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, giving biographers access to an extensive archive. But a definitive life is still out of reach, because Baldwin's correspondence with four people—including his brother David (Baldwin had eight siblings) and his Swiss lover Lucien Happersberger, whom he called "the one true love story of my life"—is under seal until 2037. (As was generally the case with the men Baldwin was attracted to, Happersberger was mainly interested in women. In 1964, he married the Black actress Diana Sands—while she was performing in Baldwin's play "Blues for Mister Charlie," something that Baldwin, understandably, regarded as a betrayal. That's what I mean by "ended unhappily.")

Another biographical challenge is that the source for a lot of what we know, or think we know, about Baldwin's life is Baldwin. He told many stories about himself, particularly in the book-length essay "No Name in the Street" (1972), and also in interviews. The difficulty is that Baldwin tended, as we all tend, to dramatize—not to dissemble, necessarily, but to highlight the significance of an experience. When most of us do this, it doesn't matter. If an event wasn't quite the way we've chosen to remember it, who cares? But we're not James Baldwin.

The flight to Paris is an example. Baldwin frequently said that it was after a Black friend, Eugene Worth, jumped to his death off the George Washington Bridge that Baldwin realized he had to leave America before he killed someone or was killed himself. He claimed that he picked Paris at random, knew no one there, and arrived with forty dollars, which was gone in two days. He avoided Americans, he insisted. "My friends were Algerians and Africans," he told an interviewer for *Essence* in 1970. "They are the people who befriended me when I arrived here broke. In a sense, we saved each other, we lived together."

This version of events is hard to verify. Baldwin gave the suicide of Eugene Worth a prominent place in his writing: Rufus, the central character in Baldwin's third novel, "Another Country," also jumps off the George Washington Bridge. But Douglas Field reports that although Worth appears in the 1930 census as an eight-year-old, there's no record of his death in city or Social Security files. There is no reason to doubt that Worth existed and was Baldwin's friend; what actually happened to him, though, is unclear.

Nor did Baldwin pick Paris out of a hat. Richard Wright, an early mentor of his, was living there. (That relationship, too, would have an unhappy ending.) Postwar Paris was a magnet for American writers, artists, and musicians. During Baldwin's years there, Robert Rauschenberg, Romare Bearden, Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, Chester Himes, Allen Ginsberg, Susan Sontag, and John Ashbery were all in town.

Many veterans went to Paris after the war to "study" at the Sorbonne on the G.I. Bill. The city had plenty of English-language bookstores and magazines, and was known for welcoming Black Americans. (Africans were another story.) Baldwin, who didn't speak French when he arrived, fit right in; Parisians were used to Americans. The real draw of the City of Light, though, was that it was incredibly cheap for people with dollars. Exchange rates were wildly favorable, and the black market offered even better deals. (After 1959, when reforms stabilized the franc and made Paris expensive, most American artists and writers stopped going there.) Baldwin came prepared: he had writing assignments lined up with New York editors, to be paid in dollars, and plenty of contacts in Paris. When he stepped off the train at the Gare des Invalides, two Americans were there to meet him and bring him straight to Les Deux Magots, where Richard Wright was waiting.

The business about the Africans and Arabs seems to have been largely made up. Baldwin actually wrote an essay in Paris, "Encounter on the Seine" (1950), about how hard it was for a Black American to relate to Africans. "The African," he wrote, "has endured privation, injustice, medieval cruelty; but the African has not yet endured the utter alienation of himself from his people and his past. . . . He has not, all his life long, ached for acceptance in a culture which pronounced straight hair and white skin as the only acceptable beauty." When Baldwin gave that *Essence* interview, in 1970, he may have been hoping to obscure the fact that most of the people he knew during his nine years in France were white.

Baldwin could also exaggerate his closeness to King. "We had been young together," he told a writer from *Life* in 1971, "we had tramped all over the South together, we had even dared hope together." King knew Baldwin but kept him at arm's length, worried about rumors that he was gay—Baldwin had not in any public sense "come out"—and Boggs speculates that this was a reason (along with his unpredictability) that Baldwin was left off the platform at the March on Washington. Baldwin had written some remarks for the occasion, but they were

read to the crowd by Burt Lancaster, with no acknowledgment that the words were Baldwin's. One of the weirder moments in civil-rights history, as Boggs says.

A lot of people write about Baldwin because they have cathected with him along some dimension. For Boggs, it was Baldwin's sexuality. In ninth grade, Boggs borrowed "Giovanni's Room" from his sister and never returned it. Later, in college, he discovered in the Beinecke Library, at Yale, the manuscript of a children's book that Baldwin had written with the French artist Yoran Cazac. It took Boggs more than twenty years, but he was able, in 2018, to bring the book into print. Meanwhile, it bothered him that earlier biographers had downplayed Baldwin's love life, and he set about to fill in some of the blanks. Hence his subtitle, "A Love Story."

Boggs's book is a full-scale biography, more than six hundred pages. Though it is principally concerned with Baldwin's personal life, it is good at showing how the life seeps into the fiction; political events receive less attention. There's heavy use of the correspondence; unfortunately, Baldwin's letters, at least the ones currently available, tend to disappoint—they are typically eloquent, sometimes anguished, but rather formal and rarely gossipy. They don't capture what the *Life* reporter called the "amusing bitchy bon vivant" side of Jimmy.

Still, Boggs's biography makes a hugely important contribution, because it takes us to the heart of Baldwin's message—the fear of love—and shows how urgent that problem was for him. Alongside the public crusade for civil rights, there was always, as Boggs shows us, a private search for a secure, loving relationship. From both angles—if you accept Baldwin's own verdict that race relations hadn't improved in his lifetime—the life was, in a sense, a failure, or at least incomplete.

Boggs sometimes strains to detect homoeroticism in Baldwin's relations with men he was friendly with. Marlon Brando and Baldwin, he writes, "may have had an

intermittently sexual relationship." Sure, maybe. But there is no evidence for it. On the whole, though, he sticks to the facts and avoids sensationalism. It's a sad story in many ways, though it reminds us that Baldwin, unlike Wright or Ellison or even Mailer, was a true bohemian. His own freedom was what mattered. "I was not born to be what someone said I was," he pronounced in the last interview he ever gave, in 1987. "I was not born to be defined by someone else, but by myself, and myself only."

A difficulty for Boggs is that Baldwin had no interest in gay rights or the "gay community." "The word 'gay' has always rubbed me the wrong way," he told the writer Richard Goldstein, who interviewed him for the *Village Voice* in 1984. "I never understood exactly what is meant by it." He thought that "homosexual" was not a noun. One of his first pieces, published in *Zero* in 1949, was an essay on homosexuality in the novel. Novelists, he argued, know that human beings are not reducible to such labels: "Once the novelist has created a human being he has shattered the label and, in transcending the subject matter, is able, for the first time, to tell us something about it and to reveal how profoundly all human beings interlock."

One of his last pieces, "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," published in *Playboy* in 1985, concludes, "We are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of a man but because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are part of each other. Many of my countrymen appear to find this fact exceedingly inconvenient and even unfair, and so, very often, do I. But none of us can do anything about it."

Baldwin was an enemy of identity politics. His message wasn't an imperative to declare your Blackness or your queerness. It was simply to live your life. His favorite writer was Henry James, another expatriate. (A visitor to the house in Saint-Paul de Vence reported seeing a wall of books on James.) A key text for Baldwin was "The Ambassadors," and the key line in it was Strether's advice to

Little Bilham: “Live all you can.” Baldwin had “The Ambassadors” in mind when he wrote “Giovanni’s Room.” “ ‘Giovanni’s Room’ is not really about homosexuality,” he told Goldstein. “It’s about what happens to you if you’re afraid to love anybody. Which is much more interesting than the question of homosexuality.”

There is nothing stereotypically gay about the lovers in Baldwin’s novel: David, a blond American living abroad, and Giovanni, an Italian bartender. They meet in a tunnel-like gay bar in Paris that Boggs identifies as La Reine Blanche, which is where Baldwin met Happersberger. There are, however, some stereotypically gay characters in the book—older men (“fairies”) pathetically cruising for trade, for example, and transvestites. Here is one, encountered in the gay bar:

> There was the boy who worked all day, it was said, in the post office, who came out at night wearing makeup and ear-rings and with his heavy blonde hair piled high. Sometimes he actually wore a skirt and high heels. . . . People said he was very nice but I confess that his utter grotesqueness made me uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people’s stomachs. They might not mind so much if monkeys did not—so grotesquely—resemble human beings.

This is told from David’s point of view and is meant to reflect his ambivalence about his own sexual instincts. (He has a girlfriend.) But the disgust is a little over the top. “I didn’t understand the necessity for all the role playing,” Baldwin said about gay men to Goldstein. For Baldwin, sexual preference, like skin color, is accident, not essence. “The people who were my lovers,” he told Goldstein, “were never, well, the word ‘gay’ wouldn’t have meant anything to them.” “That means that they moved in the straight world,” Goldstein said. “They moved in the world,” Baldwin replied.

From the beginning, Baldwin walked a tightrope. He needed both white readers and Black readers to trust him, and this proved impossible. “The Fire Next Time” was published by Dial Press in January, 1963. It consists of an article that had appeared in this magazine the prior November, under the headline

"Letter from a Region of My Mind," plus a short letter to his nephew, titled "My Dungeon Shook," which he had published in December in *The Progressive*.

The *New Yorker* article is partly a memoir of Baldwin's time as a preacher and partly a report on a visit to Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam and a racial separatist, and it ends with a version of Baldwin's core message. It stretched across eighty-five pages. (The magazine was fat with luxury-brand advertising in those days; that issue had two hundred and forty-eight pages.) *The New Yorker's* editor, William Shawn, handled the article himself and called it "one of only two or three things that really caused a sensation during my time at the magazine." The book was among the top five titles on the *Times* best-seller list for forty-one consecutive weeks.

"Another Country," which had come out the previous June, was also a best-seller. The only book that sold more copies in 1963 was "Lord of the Flies." In May, Baldwin's face was on the cover of *Time*, and *Life* ran a photo essay on his trip South to report on the civil-rights movement. *Life's* circulation was around seven million. Now everybody knew his name.

That month, Birmingham police went after civil-rights demonstrators with fire hoses and dogs. Days later, King's brother's home and a motel where King had stayed were bombed. Baldwin fired off a telegram to Attorney General Robert Kennedy, accusing the President of failing to exercise moral leadership. On May 24th, at Robert Kennedy's request, Baldwin brought leading Black figures—including celebrities like Harry Belafonte and Lena Horne—to meet with him in New York.

It did not go well. The celebrities berated Kennedy, told him he didn't get it; Kennedy bristled and insisted that they should show more appreciation for what the Administration had done. Although the meeting was supposed to be

confidential, Baldwin leaked news of it to the *Times*, and the story was on the front page for two days running: "ROBERT KENNEDY FAILS TO SWAY NEGROES AT SECRET TALKS HERE." Kennedy was pissed.

The meeting is usually described as a fiasco, but it accomplished what civil-rights leaders wanted. The Kennedys were political animals. They knew that they could not afford to alienate people such as Harry Belafonte. White folks liked Harry Belafonte. In fact, the President had already read, and been impressed by, Baldwin's *New Yorker* article, and he must now have realized that Baldwin's warning about "the fire next time" might not be hyperbole. On June 11th, John F. Kennedy delivered a televised speech announcing his intention to submit a civil-rights bill to Congress. After his death, it became the Civil Rights Act of 1964—one of Congress's most consequential laws, protecting twenty million people from racial discrimination. Baldwin should get a little of the credit. He wrote a book, and lives were changed.

But Baldwin was now in a tight spot. He risked being seen as a Black writer co-opted by white liberals—not a role he wanted. White liberals thought of themselves as the Negro's friend; they didn't like being blamed for Southern racism. They were the good guys. Yet Baldwin's point was that there are no white good guys. Every white person benefits from white supremacy. Acknowledging that is a necessary step toward real equality.

Many readers, white and Black, missed this. Most white liberals didn't feel especially targeted by Baldwin's message in "The Fire Next Time." They read the

book as a homiletic. Donald Fine, the editor-in-chief at Dell, which published the paperback edition, called it "an almost overelegant, altogether polished exposition of black-white relations that white Americans could embrace without discomfort, and which really was considerably less fiery than its biblical title."

Some Black writers missed the message, too. Soon after "The Fire Next Time" came out, LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka, but then known primarily as a Beat poet) published "Brief Reflections on Two Hot Shots," in the magazine *Kulchur*. The hot shots were the Black South African writer Peter Abrahams and Baldwin, whom Jones called the "Joan of Arc of the cocktail party." Baldwin and Abrahams, he said, "will not even open their mouths to say anything but that they are well-dressed, educated, and have feelings that are easily hurt." They "want the hopeless filth of enforced ignorance to be stopped only because they are sometimes confused with the sufferers." Which was pretty obtuse. Had he actually read the book?

At the same time, the very first piece in the very first issue of *The New York Review of Books*, dated February 1, 1963, was a critical review of "The Fire Next Time," by F. W. Dupee, of the Columbia English department. Dupee objected to Baldwin's apocalyptic tone. "Do I really *want* to be integrated into a burning house?" Baldwin had asked. The answer, Dupee wrote, is, "since you have no other, yes; and the better-disposed firemen will welcome your assistance." He thought that Baldwin was goading white racists, to no one's benefit. The poet Kenneth Rexroth echoed that criticism in the San Francisco *Examiner:* " 'The Fire Next Time' is designed to make white liberals feel terribly guilty and to scare white reactionaries into running and barking fits." Hannah Arendt, in a letter to Baldwin about his *New Yorker* piece, was blunt: "What frightened me in your essay was the gospel of love which you begin to preach at the end. In politics, love is a stranger, and when it intrudes upon it nothing is being achieved except hypocrisy."

"Blues for Mister Charlie," which ran on Broadway in 1964, was widely dismissed as agitprop. Susan Sontag complained that in Baldwin's writing "passion seems to

transmute itself too readily into stately language, into an inexhaustible self-perpetuating oratory." In 1964, with his high-school classmate Richard Avedon, Baldwin published a deluxe slipcased coffee-table book, "Nothing Personal," featuring Avedon photographs of assorted random figures including Dwight Eisenhower, Bertrand Russell, the Everly Brothers, and the inmates of a mental hospital. Baldwin's accompanying essay offered lines like "When a civilization treats its poets with the disdain with which we treat ours, it cannot be far from disaster; it cannot be far from the slaughter of the innocents." In *The New York Review of Books*, Robert Brustein, soon to become the dean of the Yale School of Drama, compared Baldwin to "a punchy and pugnacious drunk awakening from a boozy doze during a stag movie, to introduce his garrulous, irrelevant, and by now predictable comments on how to live, how to love, and how to build Jerusalem."

And, in 1966, the left-wing muckraker *Ramparts* published an article by the Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver, who, the magazine explained, was imprisoned in Soledad, California, for "assault with intent to murder," omitting mention of his rape conviction. "There is in James Baldwin," Cleaver wrote, "the most grueling, agonizing, total hatred of the blacks, particularly of himself, and the most shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of the whites that one can find in any black American writer of note." He suggested that Black homosexuals like Baldwin "are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man." The article was reprinted in Cleaver's prison book, "Soul on Ice," in 1968—a work that received respectful and often enthusiastic reviews. In an introduction to "Soul on Ice," the critic Maxwell Geismar credited Cleaver with "the best analysis of James Baldwin's literary career I have read." It is hard to believe that people once took this confused thinker seriously, but Cleaver clearly spoke to a moment.

Faced with a choice of allies, Baldwin sided with the militants. His view was that when Malcolm X or the Panthers talked about arming themselves against the cops, they, and not King or Thurgood Marshall, were speaking for the Black street. The police were armed. Why shouldn't the Panthers be? So he embraced Stokely Carmichael and the Black Power movement, Huey Newton and the Black Panthers, and Angela Davis after she was jailed on charges of providing the guns in a courtroom shoot-out in which a judge was killed. (He wrote an open letter to her which he published in *The New York Review of Books.*) He made friends with Amiri Baraka, who would speak at his funeral. When Eldridge Cleaver hit him up for money, he gave him some.

Yet Baldwin's midlife radicalism satisfied no one: to the activists, he was an interloper; to the critics, he was yesterday's news, chasing an energy he could no longer generate. In 1970, Baldwin sat down with Margaret Mead, then a celebrated anthropologist and a *Redbook* columnist. A transcript of their seven-and-a-half-hour conversation was published, seemingly unedited, as a book called "A Rap on Race"—two hundred and fifty nearly unreadable pages in which Baldwin tries to get Mead to acknowledge her guilt for Black oppression. Mead professes bafflement. She hadn't oppressed anyone; why should she feel guilty? *The New York Review of Books* headlined its review "Tape's Last Krapp." In the *Times*, the book was described as "the same old bilge you've heard from the fellow on the next stool to you in the saloon." In 1973, Baldwin wrote and narrated a show for the Newport Jazz Festival called "The Life and Times of Ray Charles," at which Charles performed. The *Times'* reviewer wrote that "the molehill that this mountain of talent produced was shocking."

Irving Howe called Baldwin's fourth novel, "Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone," published in 1968, "remarkably bad." The *Times* called it "a disaster in virtually every particular." His fifth novel, "If Beale Street Could Talk" (1974), fared no better. "I get the feeling," the *Times'* reviewer wrote, "that Mr. Baldwin doesn't worry overmuch about the authenticity of his books. He knows that, with

all his faults, a sizable portion of the American public will love him still. He is a brand name by now. In fact, he is so dated . . . that he might even qualify for our current nostalgia craze."

The critical temper was no friendlier in the years that followed. Baldwin's "The Devil Finds Work," a 1976 book on Hollywood, was described as "a rococo parody of his own work." *The New York Review of Books* called his last novel, "Just Above My Head" (1979), "repetitious and inert." When the Library of America issued two volumes of Baldwin's work, edited by Toni Morrison, in 1998, the *Times* review was headlined "TRAPPED INSIDE JAMES BALDWIN." The reviewer for this magazine wrote that, "by 1968, Baldwin found impersonating a black writer more seductive than being an artist." All those takes were by Black critics.

During the urban unrest that followed King's assassination, with arson and looting that arguably helped elect Richard Nixon, Baldwin defended the arsonists and looters. "You're accusing a captive population that has been robbed of *everything* of looting," he said to a reporter from *Esquire*. "I think it's obscene." People in the liberal mainstream thought it was political suicide to defend the looters; they could interpret Baldwin's statements as posturing. If they had taken him seriously the first time around, they would have known that it was not. In 1963, Baldwin's anger had felt cleansing. In 1968, he seemed just part of the chaos.

There were also more Black literary voices by then. Books like "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" (1969), "Roots" (1976), and "Song of Solomon" (1977) offered readers a different way of thinking about the Black experience in America. But Baldwin was not only criticized. He was dismissed as a has-been. He was the Ghost of Civil Rights Past, someone who went out with Jim Crow. His fame was identified with a particular historical moment, and he could appear to be struggling to keep up.

It's hard to deny that the work deteriorated. The life style—the alcohol, the partying, the all-nighters, the continual travel (he rarely said no to an invitation)—

must have worn Baldwin down. He made some bad choices, like the Avedon book and the Mead interview. And he was repeating himself. His fictional characters—for example, the pregnant Black teen-ager Tish, who is the narrator of "If Beale Street Could Talk"—tend to sound a lot like James Baldwin. The narrator of "Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone," a famous Black actor named Leo Proudhammer, is an obvious stand-in for Baldwin. Those novels are also badly designed; they end abruptly, as though the author had a deadline to meet.

But now, in the twenty-first century, Baldwin is back. What happened? Trayvon Martin happened. Michael Brown and Eric Garner happened. Freddie Gray and George Floyd happened. Their deaths fit a pattern that Baldwin had spent thirty years trying to get white people to see. That Garner may have been selling cigarettes illegally, or that Floyd may have tried to pass a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill, only illustrated what, according to Baldwin, Black people had always understood white people to be telling them: stay in the place assigned to you, and you'll be fine; step one inch out of line, and you're dead.

This time, white people seemed to get it. The Black Lives Matter movement, started in 2013, raised awareness that problems Baldwin had described—police brutality, the white foot on the Black neck—had changed little in half a century. Ta-Nehisi Coates's "Between the World and Me" (2015) and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr.,'s more measured "Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own" (2020) channelled Baldwin's anger and became best-sellers. "At the root of the Negro problem," Baldwin had written in 1963, "is the necessity of the white man to find a way of living with the Negro in order to live with himself."

On January 20th of this year, the page turned again. We are now in a looking-glass world in which whites are cast as the ones in need of government support and protection. This Administration—along with this Supreme Court—doesn't even want to see the word "race," or any of its cognates, like "diversity." Baldwin, too,

had hoped for a world in which nobody talked about color. This is not the form he imagined such a world would take. There's not a lot of love out there. ♦

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