

James Baldwin Wrote About Race and Identity in America

30 September 2006

VOICE ONE:

I'm Shirley Griffith.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Steve Ember with People in America in VOA Special English. Today we tell about James Baldwin, one of the most important American writers of the twentieth century. Critics praised him for honestly and bravely examining race relations and identity in the United States.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:



James Baldwin

James Baldwin wrote more than twenty novels, reports and commentary, plays and poetry. He wrote most of them during the nineteen-fifties and sixties. Some critics say his first book, "Go Tell it on the Mountain," was his best effort at storytelling. The book is based on his early life.

James Baldwin was born in nineteen twenty-four in New York City. He grew up in a mostly black area of New York called Harlem. During the nineteen thirties, the United States was suffering an economic crisis called the Great Depression. Many African-Americans, including his family, were even poorer than white Americans.

James Baldwin was the oldest child in a family of nine. He never knew his biological father. When he was three years old, his mother married a factory worker. James grew up with a severe step-father. He writes about a similar difficult relationship between father and son in "Go Tell it on the Mountain".

Another similarity between the book and the writer's life is the importance of Christianity and the church. James's step-father was also a preacher in a small church in a business area of Harlem. Such religious centers that were former stores were called "storefront churches." They were common in African-American areas.

VOICE TWO:

The boy in "Go Tell it on the Mountain" struggles between choosing to be like his father or doing something else with his life. The events happen on one day -- the boy's fourteenth birthday. In the end, he decides to do what his father

wants. James Baldwin faced a similar struggle. He became a preacher in his step-father's church for three years.

But at age seventeen, he left the church. This struggle and his experience in the church greatly influenced his writing.

Critics and Baldwin himself have said the Christian holy book, The Bible, influenced his writing. Critics also said he writes the way African-American clergy speak in church. Baldwin uses similar words, sentence rhythms, and descriptions. Jazz and blues music traditions also influenced his writing. All these have made his writing more powerful and emotionally moving.

James Baldwin blamed Christianity for providing support to slavery. He also criticized some black Christians for using their religion as an excuse to accept oppression. But, Baldwin also praised Christianity for helping African-Americans join together to fight racism.

VOICE ONE:

The book "Go Tell it on the Mountain" also describes how and why the boy's parents moved separately from the South to New York City. They were part of a great movement of southern blacks to the northern United States in the first half of the twentieth century. It was called the Great Migration.

African-Americans moved to escape southern laws on racial separation. Also, there was not enough farm work for everyone, while jobs in industries were increasing in the northern states. Baldwin explains this historical event in the personal stories of one family. His expert storytelling brings history to life.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

James Baldwin said he had to write "Go Tell It on the Mountain" so that he could write everything else. He also said he realized at a very young age that he did not have very much as a black person in America. But he knew he had his brain. So he spent a lot of time in libraries reading. And he began to write for his school magazine. James Baldwin finished high school at about the same time that he realized that he did not want to continue as a church preacher. He left home and moved to an area of New York City called Greenwich Village. The area was popular with artists.

Baldwin got jobs that did not pay much. He was very poor. But he continued to write. He published reports in magazines such as the Partisan Review and the Nation. They were not very widely read. Baldwin communicated with Richard Wright, a well-known African-American writer. Wright helped Baldwin get financial help to travel to Europe to write. He went to Paris and London in nineteen forty-eight.

Baldwin lived in Paris and the south of France for the next six years. He also lived in Istanbul, Turkey. He wrote "Go Tell It On the Mountain," which was published in nineteen fifty-three. Critics in the United States announced the arrival of a great new voice in American writing. But the book did not become popular until much later.

VOICE ONE:

In nineteen fifty-five, the essays and commentary Baldwin had written earlier were collected and published in a book. It is called "Notes of a Native Son." He wrote about social, political and cultural issues facing black people in America. He also told of his experience as a black man in Europe. Critics praised the book for clearly dealing with one of the most troubling issues of that time: racism.

Baldwin continued to write stories based on his experiences. "Giovanni's Room" was published in nineteen fifty-six. It is about a white American man in Paris who loves both an Italian man and an American woman. The book is about the struggle to accept one's sexuality. James Baldwin faced a similar struggle. His former religion condemned homosexuality, as did most of society. So it was difficult for Baldwin to accept himself.

He wrote about the same issue in his next book, "Another Country." This book is mainly based in New York City. It explores race, sex and identity among artists. Some critics said "Another Country" and "Giovanni's Room" were not very good books. But James Baldwin wrote openly and bravely about subjects that many people would not discuss in public in those days.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

Critics praised Baldwin's books that directly examined true events more than they praised his fiction. His book, "The Fire Next Time," became one of the best-selling books of nineteen sixty-three. It was called a powerful and leading voice of the civil rights movement.

African-Americans and liberal white Americans increased demands and demonstrations for equal rights for black people and other minorities. Many activists went to the southern states to help more black people sign up to vote. Baldwin left Europe for some time to take part in this action.

"The Fire Next Time" is in the form of two letters. In the first, Baldwin tells a young family member about the problems he faced as a black man in America. Baldwin also tells him to be strong and fight for justice.

The second letter is to America. Baldwin warns that race relations are so bad that something terrible might happen if they do not improve. He urges white Americans to change for their own good because they cannot live without their black brothers.

The writer says love is the only way for America not to destroy itself. "The Fire Next Time" was an influential book. It made Baldwin even more famous. His picture appeared on the cover of Time magazine. "The Fire Next Time" remains one of his most widely read books.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

James Baldwin wrote short stories, books and plays throughout the nineteen seventies and early eighties. He continued to explore issues of race, religion, sexual identity and history. These books include "The Amen Corner," "Tell me How Long the Train's Been Gone" and "If Beale Street Could Talk." His last book, "The Evidence of Things Not Seen," was published in nineteen eighty-five.

Baldwin lived both in the United States and France during this time. He taught in colleges, including the University of Massachusetts. He supported new African-American writers who later became famous, such as Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou. James Baldwin was made a Commander of the French Legion of Honor in nineteen eighty-six. He also received many awards in the United States.

James Baldwin died at his home in southern France in nineteen eighty-seven. But his voice lives on in the books that young people still read in many American classrooms and around the world. Critics say his urgent warning that we must learn to accept one another's differences is still important today.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

Our program was written by Doreen Baingana and produced by Dana Demange. I'm Steve Ember.

VOICE ONE:

And I'm Shirley Griffith. You can download transcripts and archives of our shows at voaspecialenglish.com. Join us again next week for PEOPLE IN AMERICA in VOA Special English.