

Notes of a Native Son

By James Baldwin

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
In an age of Black Lives Matter, James Baldwin's essays on life in Harlem, the protest novel, movies, and African Americans abroad are as powerful today as when they were first written. With documentaries like *I Am Not Your Negro* bringing renewed interest to Baldwin's life and work, *Notes of a Native Son* serves as a valuable introduction.

Written during the 1940s and early 1950s, when Baldwin was only in his twenties, the essays collected in *Notes of a Native Son* capture a view of black life and black thought at the dawn of the civil rights movement and as the movement slowly gained strength through the words of one of the most captivating essayists and foremost intellectuals of that era. Writing as an artist, activist, and social critic, Baldwin probes the complex condition of being black in America. With a keen eye, he examines everything from the significance of the protest novel to the motives and circumstances of the many black expatriates of the time, from his home in “The Harlem Ghetto” to a sobering “Journey to Atlanta.”

Notes of a Native Son inaugurated Baldwin as one of the leading interpreters of the dramatic social changes erupting in the United States in the twentieth century, and many of his observations have proven almost prophetic. His criticism on topics such as the paternalism of white progressives or on his own friend Richard Wright's work is pointed and unabashed. He was also one of the few writing on race at the time who addressed the issue with a powerful mixture of outrage at the gross physical and political violence against black citizens and measured understanding of their oppressors, which helped awaken a white audience to the injustices under their noses. Naturally, this combination of brazen criticism and unconventional empathy for white readers won Baldwin as much condemnation as praise.

Notes is the book that established Baldwin's voice as a social critic, and it remains one of his most admired works. The essays collected here create a cohesive sketch of black America and reveal an intimate portrait of Baldwin's own search for identity as an artist, as a black man, and as an American.

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
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Editorial Review

Review

“The wonderful thing about writers like Baldwin is the way we read them and come across passages that are so arresting we become breathless and have to raise our eyes from the page to keep from being spirited away.”

—Edward P. Jones, from his new introduction

“Written with bitter clarity and uncommon grace.”

—*Time*

“A straight-from-the-shoulder writer, writing about the troubled problems of this troubled earth with an illuminating intensity.”

—Langston Hughes, *The New York Times Book Review*

“He named for me the things you feel but couldn’t utter . . . articulated for the first time to white America what it meant to be American and a black American at the same time.”

—Henry Louis Gates Jr.

“I owe a tremendous debt to the example of his work.”

—John Edgar Wideman

“Baldwin’s vision, his humor, his tragically beautiful style, make this a book [to] . . . turn to for a long time.”

—Kay Boyle, *The American Scholar*

About the Author

James Baldwin (1924–1987) was a novelist, essayist, playwright, poet, and social critic, and one of America’s foremost writers. His writing explores palpable yet unspoken intricacies of racial, sexual, and class distinctions in Western societies, most notably in mid-twentieth-century America. A Harlem, New York, native, he primarily made his home in the south of France. He is the author of several novels and books of nonfiction, including *Notes of a Native Son*, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Giovanni’s Room*, *Another Country*, *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, *Just Above My Head*, *The Fire Next Time*, *No Name in the Street*, and *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, and of the poetry collection *Jimmy’s Blues*.

Edward P. Jones is the author of the Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *The Known World*. He won the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award and was a finalist for the National Book Award for his debut collection of stories, *Lost in the City*. His second collection, *All Aunt Hagar’s Children*, was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction.

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From the Introduction

I did not know James Baldwin the essayist before my first year of college. I knew only the James Baldwin of novels and short stories and plays, a trusted man who gave me, with his Harlem and his Harlem people, the

kind of world I knew so well from growing up in my Washington, D.C. They were all one family, the people in Harlem and the people in Washington, Baldwin told me in that way of all grand and eloquent writers who speak the eternal and universal by telling us, word by hard-won word, of the minutiae of the everyday: The church ladies who put heart and soul into every church service as if to let their god know how worthy they are to step through the door into his heaven. The dust of poor folks' apartments that forever hangs in the air as though to remind the people of their station in life. The streets of a city where the buildings Negroes live in never stand straight up but lean in mourning every which way.

So I knew this Baldwin and, in that strange way of members of the same family, he knew me. When I went off to college in late August 1968, I took few books, anticipating the adequacy of the library that awaited me at Holy Cross College. I packed only two books of nonfiction, both bought in a used bookstore not long after I was accepted to college. Both had never been read. The first was a ponderous 1950s tome on writing logical and well-reasoned essays. I was never to read it in my time at Holy Cross, perhaps because it was so inaccessible. (Seeing it on my dormitory room's bookshelf, Clarence Thomas, a month before his graduation from Holy Cross in 1971, purchased the book from me for \$5; I do not recall what I paid for it.) And the second was *Notes of a Native Son*. I was going off to a new life, a life of the mind and education among white people, and I felt that since Baldwin's fiction had taught me so much about black people, his essays might have a similar effect given where I was going.

I entered Holy Cross as a mathematics major, primarily because I had done well in math in high school. I was extremely shy then, and I had never had my vision tested and did not know enough about anything to realize that my frequent inability to see the blackboard could be solved with eyeglasses. I sat in the back of the freshman calculus class run by a standoffish professor who spent most of the period with his back to his students as he wrote on the blackboard, and with all of that, I fell further and further behind as the semester progressed.

I will go into English, I told myself in December, knowing how much I loved to read and knowing that a calculus D was coming and so there would be no life in mathematics. Before leaving for Christmas vacation, I picked up *Notes of a Native Son* for the first time, perhaps understanding that now my life would be increasingly one of essay writing. The first thing James Baldwin tells me in "Autobiographical Notes" is, "I was born in Harlem. . . ." A simple, unadorned statement, as if in saying it plainly the reader would have a better sense of the importance of that fact. It was Harlem, but because I was so familiar with the Baldwin of fiction, the Baldwin whose black people could be Washingtonians, he could only have begun to connect in a better way if he had said, "I was born in Washington, D.C. . . ."

A good bit of that introductory essay deals with being a writer, something that would not have much meaning for me for many years: the necessity of delving into oneself to be able to tell the truth about the world one writes about; the difficulties of being a Negro writer when "the Negro problem" is so widely written about; the desire, at the end of the day, to be "a good writer."

But within that short essay is a thirty-one-year-old, somewhat worldly man (I did not get my first passport until I was fifty-four) who is still grappling with having been born into a small and often less than caring world, which was, for good or bad, a part of a larger world that generally rejected him and his small world. I was a Holy Cross student—often happy to be a student at "the Cross"—but I knew every time I stepped out of my room in Beaven dormitory that no part of that place in Worcester, Massachusetts, had been made with me in mind. I felt that but did not yet have very many words for it. Baldwin gave them to me. This is Baldwin, with his "special attitude," talking of Shakespeare and the cathedral at Chartres and Rembrandt and the Empire State Building and Bach: "These were not really my creations, they did not contain my history; I might search in them in vain forever for any reflection of myself. I was an interloper; this was not my

heritage.”

And so he continued throughout the rest of *Notes*, a gloriously keen and sensitive mind, something I did not completely appreciate at the time, something I’m sure he would smile about now. I confess that I could not then grasp some of his more complex thoughts, perhaps because I was merely too young and the world had yet to take such a harsh hold on me. And other thoughts of his I just dismissed, no doubt because I was, again, too young and because I was developing a militant streak that scoffed at notions not in line with my own developing ones. That militancy came naturally with the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Vietnam War and with the new awareness that I was black in a white world. The militant me asked, for example, why would Baldwin write at times as if he were not black but some observer, a guilty one, true, but still an observer. “Our dehumanization of the Negro then,” he says to me in “Many Thousands Gone,” “is indivisible from dehumanization of ourselves: the loss of our own identity is the price we pay for our annulment of his.” And later: “We (Americans in general, that) like to point to Negroes and to most of their activities with a kind of tolerant scorn. . . .”

But with my focus on the constant use of words like “we” and “our,” it was easy for eighteen-year-old me in those last days of December 1968 to lose sight of so much of the truth and pain of that and other statements in “Thousands.” People, I have learned, have a way of taking root in one’s still-developing mind without our knowing it, especially people, like Baldwin, who live in the world of words. How else, then, to explain my every effort to tell in a novel as best I could the stories of slave masters, black and white, and how slavery crushed their souls every morning they got up from their beds and thanked their god for their dominion over others. If I knew the importance of telling that, it was because Baldwin and his kind had planted the idea long ago. (I give him so much credit because he was in the minority of all the black writers I was reading who understood the importance of giving white people their due as full-fledged human beings. Even before I knew I would get into this writing thing, Baldwin told me this: You do not have to fully humanize your black characters by dehumanizing the white ones.)

Traveling with Baldwin through *Notes*’ “The Harlem Ghetto,” “Journey to Atlanta,” and “Notes of a Native Son,” I was given a grander portrait of the man I had known only through fiction. His fiction certainly had an unprecedented and absolute life of its own, and I might have tried to imagine the man I was dealing with, but those essays afforded me something beyond the postage stamp-sized pictures of him and the few sentences of biography that came with my paperback editions of, say, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* or *Another Country*. He would have been Baldwin had I never read those essays, but he would not have been real enough to deign to share a moment or two with me. The fiction offered a person of enormous humanity. The essays offered a man, a neighbor, or, yes, an older brother.

I had gone through the Washington, D.C., riots after King’s assassination, an explosion that took place some twenty-five years after the Harlem riots Baldwin describes in “Notes.” Different city, different actors, but the same script as that used in the nationwide riots of the 1910s, also a conflagration that included Washington. I was mainly on the periphery of matters that April 1968. (My poor mother had enough to worry about; the last thing I wanted was to add another thousand pounds to her burden and have her see her college-bound child in jail.) And with a summer job and college looming, I had not had time to assess my feelings or consider those of my classmates or neighbors. The wonderful thing about writers like Baldwin is the way we read them and come across passages that are so arresting we become breathless and have to raise our eyes from the page to keep from being spirited away. During those few days in April, I had been out and about enough in my city to sense something new and different about all the shouting and window-breaking and looting people, something ancient and deep. This is Baldwin explaining to me in words written twelve years after the Harlem riots and thirteen years before the Washington riots: “[S]omething heavy in their stance seemed to indicate that they had all, incredibly, seen a common vision, and on each face there seemed

to be the same strange, bitter shadow.”

Time after time, he keeps doing this so that it becomes not enough for the reader to just raise the eyes to find breath again. In “Equal in Paris,” there is the sad tale of Baldwin being jailed for days during Christmastime in 1949 after being given a used hotel sheet he did not know had been stolen. Yes. Days. Used sheet. One does not understand the full meaning of “Kafkaesque” until this tale has been absorbed. Baldwin does not say it outright, but what becomes clear with his journey through a perversely blind justice system is that France, for “all the wretched,” had not moved very far from what the people were enduring before the French Revolution.

It is all so utterly absurd (and this absurdity is another layer of oppression) that it truly becomes humorous. And with that as well is Baldwin’s realization that the people who run such a system are first cousins of those who run things in “my native land.” He cannot escape them, even in a place called Paris, and he is better for knowing this. “In some deep, black, stony, and liberating way, my life, in my own eyes, began during that first year in Paris. . . .”

And so he continues on, page after page, offering light and understanding and a ruthless insistence not so much that he is correct with his vision of matters, but that to ignore his side of things is to see only a partial picture that will not lead to lasting solutions. I can see this best now that I have reread *Notes* for this essay and now that life has done things to me. Which is why his book is to be treasured. In small ways, in large ways.

Of the *Amsterdam Star-News*, he notes in “The Harlem Ghetto” that it “is Republican [no doubt the legacy of Abraham Lincoln freeing the slaves with the belief that it would shorten the Civil War], a political affiliation that has led it into some strange doubletalk. . . .” I had to chuckle. He was writing of possibly gentler, kinder Republicans, who were, in a matter of years, to grow into even more vicious and uncaring political animals. I do not know if Baldwin witnessed any of what happened when black conservatives came out of the woodwork during Ronald Reagan’s presidency. A collection of blacks who to this day have to defend all the white racists in the various spokes of the Republican Party wheel. Doubletalk.

And the entire essay “Journey to Atlanta” is a grand cautionary story about black politicians and white radicals and liberals, who with their own doubletalk seek to mask a paternalism that sees black people as no more than children. As I read his words again, I kept thinking of all the white liberals around Washington, D.C., who wrote racist comments in 2010 to area newspapers and blogs after the black mayor (a rather reviled figure among many black folks) was defeated by another black candidate, complaining that “nigger” voters simply did not know what was good for them. Baldwin—with his tale of his teenage brother David going South—offered his warning in 1948.

One of the wonders of coming back to *Notes* after such a long time is how “current” Baldwin is. That might sound like a cliché, but in so many instances in our lives we learn that some clichés are built on things solid and familiar and time- less. “Journey to Atlanta” is but one of a hundred examples in *Notes*. What also comes across, again, is how optimistic James Baldwin was about himself, his world, black people. Even when he describes the awfulness of being black in America, he presents us with an optimism that is sometimes like subtle background music, and sometimes like an insistent drumbeat. But through it all, with each word—perhaps as evidence of a man certain of his message—he never shouts.

—Edward P. Jones
June 29–July 5, 2012
Washington, D.C.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Anna Maples:

This Notes of a Native Son book is simply not ordinary book, you have after that it the world is in your hands. The benefit you will get by reading this book is information inside this publication incredible fresh, you will get data which is getting deeper you actually read a lot of information you will get. This particular Notes of a Native Son without we comprehend teach the one who reading through it become critical in thinking and analyzing. Don't be worry Notes of a Native Son can bring when you are and not make your bag space or bookshelves' turn out to be full because you can have it in your lovely laptop even cell phone. This Notes of a Native Son having good arrangement in word along with layout, so you will not truly feel uninterested in reading.

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