JAMES BALDWIN, AN ORIGINAL

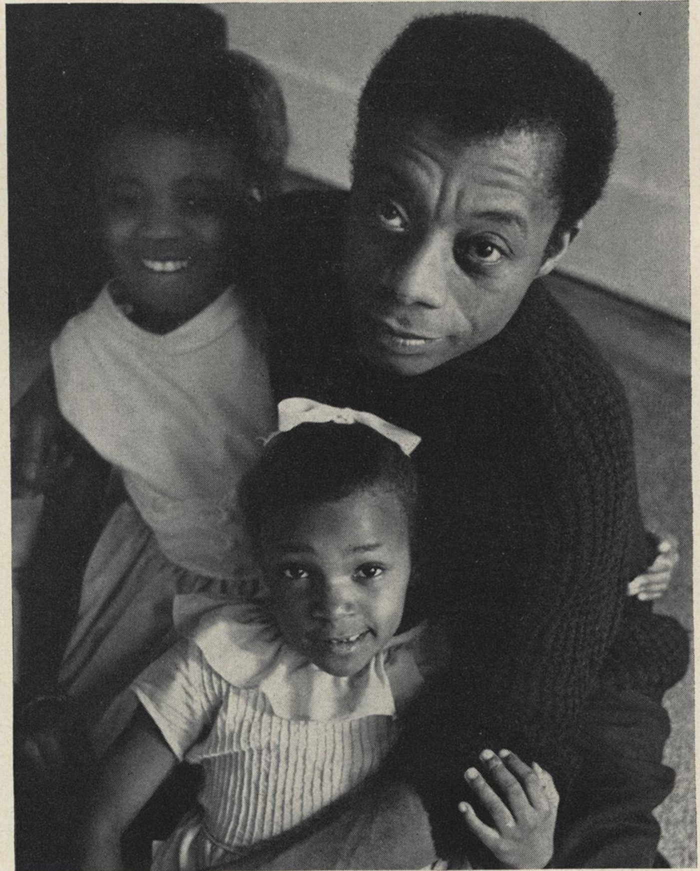
A sharpened view of him

In repose, James Baldwin is an ugly man. He has been told so all his life. Long before he knew that being a Negro could be considered ugly in itself (that is, long before he was ten years old and two white policemen "amused themselves by leaving me flat on my back in one of Harlem's empty lots"), he had grown used to the cruel mirror held before him by his friends and by his father. At school, he learned that being darker than many of his classmates and smaller—and smarter—than any of them was no advantage: they called him "Frog Eyes" and beat him often. From his father, a fundamentalist Christian minister and implacably stern, he learned that his ugliness was the ugliness of sin, that the intelligence shining from his strange, prominent eyes was the knowledge of the devil. "You always," he now says sadly, "take your estimate of yourself from what the world says about you."

Those eyes still dominate his face. Everything in it—a high forehead sloping back from the nose, a chin receding slightly beneath a broad mouth—is in their trajectory, and they can nail the attention of anyone within their range.

Moving through a restaurant during a break in rehearsals of *Blues for Mister Charlie*, his Broadway play, it seemed that the vitality of his gaze had infected the whole of his thin, wiry body. Even sitting dead still and thoughtful, he gave the impression of movement, of an energy barely controlled. He is a Presence, and in that presence it is suddenly difficult to know whether he is ugly or something close to beautiful.

We sat at a large round table and talked around or through the arrivals of friends, actors, publicity agents, and waiters. It was two days before an opening that, at considerable expense, had been delayed twice and was about to be delayed again. Everyone had an urgent problem that only Jimmy could solve: Why weren't there any posters? When would a major script change go into rehearsal? Didn't the Whitetown party scene seem dull compared to the one in Blacktown? Who could replace an actor gone to the hospital? Baldwin listened intently to each petition, thought for a moment, answered, and smiled with an abrupt good humour that seemed to split his narrow face in two. In response to one mysterious, whispered summons ("she's very upset, baby, and she'll only talk to you"), he crossed the street to the ANTA Theatre and returned, in a humour less good, to explain that The Actors Studio had refused to finance another postponement. "I just phoned my lawyer and I'm going to put up the money out of my own pocket. There's a lot riding on this show. Those actors over there are depending on it, I'm putting part of the proceeds in trust for my nieces and nephews, and I put a lot of blood into it, baby, a lot of blood." The idea for the play—loosely based on the murder of Emmett Till and the acquittal of the murderer who later disclosed how he committed the crime—came to Baldwin in 1958, but it wasn't until last year ("I blackmailed myself into doing it by *telling* everybody I was doing it") that he began to write it. "I worked in buses and planes and between speeches. I knew if I didn't keep at it, I might get seduced into thinking of myself as a civil rights leader." He lit a cigarette. "It's easy to get involved so much you stop writing . . . you know, they can raise a lot of money just on my *name?*"



JAMES BALDWIN WITH TWO OF HIS NIECES — BRUCE DAVIDSON

Burgess Meredith, the director of *Mister Charlie*, hurried Baldwin back to the theatre for another emergency conference. He returned, alone and not smiling, to point an accusing finger at my notes. "You take this down, you *print* this." His voice rose to a stridence that must have shaken crowds of sinners in the Harlem church where he preached as a boy. "I'll *never* do another play with The Actors Studio. When this is over—I can't quit now—but when this is over, I'm going to write the *Mister Charlie Log*, and baby, that book is going to *blast that Actors Studio right out of the water!*" He looked

by Gloria Steinem

gloomily over his Scotch-on-the-rocks and steak Tartare. "What you learn as you get older," he said, softly, "is that there *are* no experts, that nobody knows a damn bit more about anything than you do."

Silence descended on everyone at the table. A publicity man began explaining to me, in a whisper, how difficult it had been to cut the play's original playing time (". . . just one of the three acts ran over two hours . . ."), but Baldwin banged the table with his fist until the china jumped, and his preacher-voice boomed, "I've compromised *enough!*" Had he succeeded in getting the opening delayed for a week after all? His frown dissolved in that face-splitting grin. "Sure," he said. "After a certain point, nobody, no-*body*, can make me back down."

Baldwin's opinion of the theatre is not high. He views it as a series of timid, commercial speculations, on- or off-Broadway, but he felt that this play had to be written. "The writer doesn't choose his material. *It* chooses *him.*" He pushed away his untouched steak, lit a cigarette, and settled down to an explanation of this, his first Broadway play. "First of all, I think it's clear that, though the action takes place in a small Southern town, it applies to the whole country. The boy has been spiritually killed in the North—that's why he became a junkie—but he's kicked his habit, he's paid his dues, and then he's actually killed, shot, after he goes home to recover. But in a way, he forces the white man, a poor white storekeeper, to kill him. Because that's the only weapon left to him: to say, 'Okay, you want to come after me, daddy, you come ahead, but you're going to have to *kill* me. Are you ready for that? Are you ready to *kill* me?'

"The central character of the play is really Mister Charlie—*all* white men are Mister Charlie to a Negro and all white girls are Miss Anne: I can't believe white people can have lived in this country and not *know* that—and this Mister Charlie murders Richard, and he's murdered another Negro before that. This poor white man, this murderer, is the real victim. He's the one we've locked in ignorance and suffering and *guilt* with this crazy system. I knew I had to get *inside* him, to draw him as a valid character—no man is really a villain in his own eyes—and that was what frightened me most about writing the play. In real life, after all, I'd be afraid of him, I might want to kill him. The other important white character is a newspaper editor who tries to help the Negroes, but who fails them, and himself, in the end. He's modelled, but in a much lower key, on Faulkner.

"But it's Mister Charlie, the murderer, who is really in spiritual darkness. And we, all of us, are responsible for letting him believe that black men are worthless, and that it is his sacred duty to protect the purity of his tribe. *We* are guilty of not protecting his victim—you can't tell me that a country capable of mounting a campaign in Viet Nam can't protect my life or the life of any other Negro—*we* are the ones who made him a murderer."

He paused. Everyone at the table had been absorbed, their eyes fixed on Baldwin's face. His secretary and closest friend, a young Swiss painter named Lucien, broke the silence to remind him that afternoon rehearsals had begun, but Baldwin was still thoughtful. "You know, I only realized recently that there has been a dead boy in all my books. Dead by murder or suicide or both." I think: Yes, it's true; Elizabeth's lover in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Giovanni in *Giovanni's Room*, Rufus in *Another Country*, and now Richard.

He rose and everyone at the table rose: the group may vary from literary to civil rights to theatrical, but, like a boxer, Baldwin always travels with an entourage.

"I guess it's obvious," he said, smiling apologetically, his eyes huge, "that I'm afraid the dead boy will be me."

The death, or the spiritual death, of the young and talented has been as much a fact of Baldwin's life as an obsession in his work. "Most of my friends," he says simply, "died before they were thirty." He remembers vividly a young girl in his father's church who went insane ("they found her screaming, screaming in the streets") and was committed to an institution. A boy, his closest friend, died at thirteen because "he was left alone, abandoned in Harlem." When Baldwin was twenty-two, a friend, Eugene Worth, who had been disastrously involved with a white girl, jumped from the George Washington Bridge; eventually Worth became the model for Rufus in *Another Country*, but, "it took a long time, it took me from 1946 to 1951 to be able to deal with it at all." The murder of Medgar Evers, a friend with whom Baldwin had done civil rights work in Mississippi, was another impetus to the writing of *Mister Charlie;* the play is dedicated to his memory and to his wife and children, as well as to "the dead children of Birmingham."

Somewhere in all his books and most of his conversations there comes a mourning sentence like this one from the play: "He was a beautiful cat, and they killed him. That's all. That's *all.*"

And somewhere, through all of his work, there walk, like repertory players, the clearly recognizable figures of his family, and of the people who have influenced him in the four stages of his life: Harlem, the Village, Paris, and, now, the struggle for civil rights.

Baldwin's family was an island of discipline and religion in a Harlem district now called Junkie's Hollow. Reverend David Baldwin ruled the house with coldness and force ("I do not remember, in all of those years," wrote Baldwin, "that one of his children was ever glad to see him come home"), and his gentle wife could do little to soften him, especially toward Jimmy who (Continued on page 129)

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was the least favoured child. He spent all his childhood trying unsuccessfully to earn his father's love: "He taught me about hate, which means he taught me, without realizing it, the importance of love. And he taught me that the real weapons were patience, and a kind of ruthless determination to endure and wait."

As the eldest of nine children, Baldwin learned to take care of them all: to bathe them, take them to a bread plant for day-old baked goods, defend them against their father, walk them in a stroller through the filth of Lenox Avenue, and, inevitably, to love them. His most persistent childhood memory is "taking care of babies with one hand and holding a book with the other." He read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *A Tale of Two Cities* over and over again, and now counts "the King James Bible, the rhetoric of the store-front church, something ironic and violent and perpetually understated in Negro speech, and something of Dickens' love for bravura" among his most important influences.

When he was nine, a white schoolteacher gave him books, and encouraged him to write a play. She took him to the theatre and, for several years, did her best to help the family, but her good will only made David Baldwin suspicious. From the depths of his New Orleans experience, he assured his family that all white people were heathens and "would do anything to keep a Negro down." "I did not feel this way," wrote Baldwin in *Notes of a Native Son*, "and I was certain, in my innocence, that I never would."

When Baldwin was fourteen, the familiar rent parties, fights, prostitutes, and crimes of his neighbourhood began to take on a new attraction—and horror—for him. "The wages of sin," he wrote in "Down at the Cross," "were visible everywhere, in every wine-stained and urine-splashed hallway, in every clanging ambulance bell, in every scar on the faces of the pimps and their whores, in every helpless, newborn baby being brought into this danger, in every knife and pistol fight on the Avenue. . . ." Religion seemed to be the only alternative, and the church suddenly became his refuge.

At the end of an emotional crisis which lasted all that long hot summer, he fell screaming and writhing to the floor of the church in a fit of conversion that he finds mysterious even now: "One moment I was on my feet, singing and clapping and, at the same time, working out in my head the plot of a play I was working on then; the next moment, with no transition, no sensation of falling, I was on my back, with the lights beating down into my face and all the vertical saints above me."

He was told that he was "saved," that the hand of God had been put upon him, and it helped him to feel protected against the life of "the Street" and the strange changes in his own body. Gratitude, terror that he might backslide, and a conscious desire to compete with his father made him decide to become a Young Minister. He was a great success: the sermons he wrote were full of rich Biblical imagery, and what he now recalls as "the hysteria of my own dishonesty" lent passion to their delivery. For more than three years, he swayed crowds from the pulpit, but his own disillusionment grew steadily. He saw, from the inside, that the church was just another business to many of the people who ran it and he began, disastrously, to read Dostoevski. By the time he graduated from De Witt Clinton High School, his Sunday preaching had stopped, more education seemed pointless ("I'd seen far too many college-educated handymen for that"), and he had decided to leave home.

Wartime made it easy to get a job at a defense plant in New Jersey, but life on the job was far from easy. After seventeen years of living in a ghetto, he was exposed, for the first time, to the white world that had created it: the connection between his colour and his situation finally was made clear. He was introduced to Southern co-workers, black and white, thrown out of restaurants, treated as invisible by his white bosses, and finally—because characteristically, he chose to fight back—fired.

"That year in New Jersey," he wrote, "having an unsuspected predilection for it, I first contracted some dread, chronic disease. . . . There is not a Negro alive who does not have this rage in his blood—one has the choice, merely, of living with it consciously or surrendering to it."

Baldwin was called back to Harlem by his father's illness. On July 29, 1943—his lungs eaten away by tuberculosis and his mind by a bitterness that made him believe his family was poisoning him—David Baldwin died of self-induced starvation. On August 3, the day of his father's funeral, James Baldwin became nineteen. He looked around him at Harlem, at "brilliant people trapped in basements, being janitors," and fled to Greenwich Village to try ("I didn't have much hope, baby, but I knew I had to *try*") a writing career.

Baldwin worked at odd jobs during the day and wrote at night, but the Village wasn't the refuge he had hoped for. Friends turned out not to be friends ("I'd get invited to a party and find myself beaten up afterwards"), policemen arrested him ("they wanted to know why I wasn't uptown; there were only half a dozen Negroes in the Village then"), landladies evicted him, and he discovered new kinds of prejudice ("I went with a lot of white girls in those days"). But he did write fifty pages of the first version of his novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and Richard Wright liked them enough to help him get a Eugene F. Saxton Fellowship. The novel collapsed, and Baldwin went into hiding: "I was afraid to face anyone, let alone Richard. . . . It simply had not occurred to me in those days that anyone *could* approve of me if I had tried for something and failed."

A few book reviews ("about the Negro problem, concerning which the colour of my skin made me automatically an expert") and one novel (also unpublishable) later, the money from a second grant was running out and so was his confidence: "I could not be certain whether I was really rich or really poor, really black or really white, really male or really female, really talented or a fraud, really strong or merely stubborn. . . ." Armed with a one-way plane ticket and forty dollars, he sought another refuge: Paris.

For four years, Baldwin lived a precarious round of writing in cafés to keep warm, pawning and re-claiming his typewriter, learning to get on with French plumbing and French grammar, working as an office boy for an American patent attorney, and selling an occasional essay to "little" magazines.

More important, he made the disquieting discovery that, culturally, he had more in common with any Texas G.I. than with an African or Frenchman. One steadying influence was his friendship with seventeen-year-old Lucien Happersberger whom Baldwin took in, "partly because, I suppose, I still had the habits of an older brother," and the other steadying influence was his work: somehow, in the midst of uncertainty and self-revelation, he finished the second version of *Go Tell It on the Mountain.*

Staked to a ticket home by Marlon Brando, a friend from the Village, Baldwin arrived in New York with ten dollars and a novel in his pocket. He remembers that visit as a nightmare ("I had no money, I'd lost touch with my friends, and suddenly I was a 'nigger' again"); when Knopf bought the book, he used his advance to go back to Paris.

In Europe, he again found himself free but rootless. "Stranger in the Village," from his first collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*, records his visit to Lucien's family chalet in a Swiss village. He was a curiosity, not a human being; no black man had ever been seen there before, and children touched him "to see if the black would rub off." Whatever crippling problems Americans might have, he wrote, "no other people has ever been so deeply involved in the lives of black men, and vice versa." He made his decision: "I must accept the status which myth, if nothing else, gives me in the West before I can hope to change the myth."

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Like a man testing the water before he dives in, Baldwin made a nine-month trip home in 1954. He had never been South in all his thirty years, but he determined to conquer his fear and accepted an assignment from *Look* to travel there, and write about it. The trip marked the beginning of his commitment to the civil rights movement. "People talked to me as though I were a messenger," he said. "I had to get the message out." He went back to Paris to write, but there was no longer any question of where his roots were.

During the next ten years, Baldwin continued to shuttle back and forth between Europe and America. The discursive, elegant prose of his first essay collection received critical praise; his first play, *The Amen Corner,* was produced at Howard University; and he finished his second novel, *Giovanni's Room,* though its publication was delayed because at least one publisher objected to its homosexual theme. In 1957 and 1958, he worked as an assistant to the director, Elia Kazan, on the productions of *Sweet Bird of Youth* and *J.B.*, but decided that a career in the theatre "could only increase a level of frustration already dangerously high," and returned "like a good boy" to Europe to work on his most recent novel, *Another Country.*

At about the same time, the essays he had written since the 1955 publication of *Notes of a Native Son* were published under the title, *Nobody Knows My Name,* and his lucid, bitter writing on the South was a bombshell. He was already well-known as a literary figure and his controversial expression of the Negro movement was making him a national celebrity. Even those who disagreed with him most violently were forced to listen: as one Southerner said, "He's taught us one thing—when you look down at a small, ugly Negro boy, the intelligence of a James Baldwin may be looking back." With the publication of *Another Country* and the long essay, "The Fire Next Time," his place as the most strident and literate voice in the civil rights revolution was secure.

Wide-ranging and full of bitterness, he is determined to tell "just what it's like to be black, baby; I mean what it's *really* like." He never stops reminding us that our economy ". . . was built on my back; I picked the cotton, I built the railroads," that "you've made me the object of your sexual fantasies, and that says something about *you,* not me," and that, "there isn't a Negro alive who doesn't hate white people somewhere, sometime." He has no pity for liberals who "think they're doing something for *me,* as if they were missionaries; they've got to learn that they're doing it for *themselves.*" His message is always brutal: ". . . in the face of one's victim," he wrote, "one sees oneself. Walk through the streets of Harlem and see what we, this nation, have become."

But the brutality and urgency of his writing sometimes overpower another message. He does not hate or advocate hatred for a rock-bottom reason that he learned at his father's bedside: "Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated. . . ." When his characters destroy themselves—Rufus in *Another Country,* David in *Giovanni's Room,* the father in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*—it is always because they have become too bitter to give love or to accept it. When, like Vivaldo and Ida in *Another Country,* they succeed, it is only because they may be able to see each other clearly, without illusion, and to accept what they see with love.

In spite of his fascination with violence, Baldwin is almost like J. D. Salinger in his insistence on the spiritual necessity of loving: in "My Dungeon Shook," an essay in the form of a letter to his nephew, Baldwin wrote, "the really terrible thing, old buddy, is that *you* must accept *them* [white people]. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love."

An interviewer once asked James Baldwin what he would say if a man from Mars suddenly appeared and asked, "What are you?" "At the time I left the country in 1948," he replied, "I would have answered your man from Mars by saying 'I am a writer'—with an edge in my voice while thinking: I am a nigger, you green bastard. Now I think I'd say to him: 'I am a writer with a lot of work to do and wondering if I can do it!' "

In spite of critical opinion that he is primarily an essayist, Baldwin is determined to continue writing fiction. ("I'm going to become a great novelist . . . at a certain point, you know, criticism becomes irrelevant.") His characters are often stereotypes and he rarely resists the temptation to step outside a dialogue and deliver a small philosophical lecture, but, like Eugene O'Neill, he piles up enough raw emotion to overshadow technical flaws. As Norman Mailer wrote of *Another Country,* "Its peculiar virtue is that Baldwin commits every *gaffe* in the art of novel writing, and yet has a powerful book."

He has little to say about his immediate plans for fiction except that he wants to write another play, "a knockdown, drag-out farce." The text for a book with the photographer, Richard Avedon, and an assessment of the Federal Bureau of Investigation for *The New Yorker* will be published soon. As he wrote of Richard Wright, ". . . he worked up until the end, died, as I hope I do, in the middle of a sentence."

Meanwhile, his life is still full of ironies. Publishers are offering him as much as one hundred thousand dollars to sign a contract, but habit and the support of nieces and nephews mean that he continues to live simply. He has received many awards and honours, including the recent election to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, but he has difficulty getting an apartment in New York City.

To solve the last problem, he plans to buy a house in which he can install himself, his office, his mother, Lucien, Lucien's wife, their eleven-year-old son, to whom Baldwin is godfather, and any other members of his entourage whom he wants with him. He admitted that it might be a pretty strange household, but when asked what would make it run, he had the answer. "Love, baby," he said, "just love."