

A CRITIC AT LARGE

THE ENEMY WITHIN

The making and unmaking of James Baldwin.

BY HILTON ALS

TWENTY-TWO years ago, when I was fourteen, I was given James Baldwin's second collection of essays, "Nobody Knows My Name" (1961), by his friend and my mentor the writer Owen Dodson, who was one of the more ebullient survivors of the Harlem Renaissance. The dust jacket of the book featured a photograph of Baldwin wearing a white T-shirt and standing in a pile of rubble in a vacant lot. It was this photograph that compelled me to read the book. I had never seen an image of a black boy like me—Baldwin looked as if he could have been posing in my old neighborhood, in East New York—gracing anything as impressive as a collection of essays. In fact, shortly after Owen gave me the book I began to pretend that the photograph of Baldwin was of me, or the writer I meant to be, and that the book's contents were my spiritual autobiography, or a record of the life I longed to lead. I was living in a roach-infested apartment in Crown Heights, along with my mother, my older sister, my younger brother, and the wearying fear that I would never escape from it. Baldwin, though, had grown up in circumstances not so different from my own, and he had gone on to become one of the most eminent writers America had ever produced. In the book, there was Baldwin in Paris attending a conference at the Sorbonne, Baldwin in Sweden interviewing Ingmar Bergman, Baldwin grappling with the exigencies of the life of the writer. And there was Baldwin realizing that, no matter how hard he had tried to separate himself from that black boy picking his way through the rubble of Harlem, he would always be regarded by some as a "nigger."

I didn't believe that I was a nigger, but I was certainly viewed with contempt by friends and family whenever my differences—which took the form of reading and writing, and hanging out with boys

who called one another "girlfriend"—declared themselves. In reading Baldwin, then, I was listening to my secret voice, the voice of someone who wasn't afraid to describe who he was and where he'd come from and what he'd seen. Baldwin was also able to convey, in his labyrinthine, emotional prose, the persistent guilt that I felt toward my family—the family I would need to leave in order to become myself. And what compounded the guilt was the vague suspicion that in leaving them behind I would be leaving my blackness behind as well, to join the white world—a world that more often than not hurt and baffled my mother and siblings. Baldwin understood these things, because he'd survived them.

During the following year, I spent many hours in the main branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, hunched over bound volumes of old magazines featuring stories about Baldwin. I was struck, in some photographs, by his enormous eyes, like dark poppies in bloom, raised in mock or serious consternation; in others, by his enormous grin, with the "liar's space" between the two front teeth. And then there were the interviews, during which he spoke with great candor and wit:

JOURNALIST: When you were starting out as a writer, you were black, impoverished, and homosexual. You must have said to yourself, "Gee, how disadvantaged can I get?"

BALDWIN: No, I thought I had hit the jackpot. It was so outrageous, you had to find a way to use it.

When I was older, and had become a writer myself, my feelings about Baldwin grew ambivalent. I have never been comfortable being identified as a black writer, particularly when that description comes from a white audience, which knows nothing of the limitations imposed by the term. Nor have I ever been comfortable with the presumed fraternity of black writers, academics, and intellectuals: I

have spent my entire life trying to come to grips with my feelings for my own family, and had little interest in being adopted by another—one with its own provincialism, competitiveness, and misapprehensions. Baldwin, at one point in his life, felt the same. In 1959, when he was thirty-five, he wrote from his self-imposed exile in Europe that he had left America because he wanted to prevent himself from becoming merely "a Negro writer." He went on to become exactly that: the greatest Negro writer of his generation. Perhaps none of us escape the whipping post we've carved our names on. But Baldwin's career became a cautionary tale for me, a warning as well as an inspiration.

I recently returned to Baldwin, prompted by the Library of America's just-published two-volume selection of his novels, short stories, and essays, edited by Toni Morrison (\$70). And I found that what I identified with in his work—the high-faggot style of his voice, the gripping narrative of his ascent from teen evangelist to cultural icon—had not changed for me since the days when I devoured his books like "some weird food" (as Baldwin once described his own early love of reading). My admiration for the way in which he alchemized the singularity of his perspective into art had not diminished. Neither had my discomfort with the way he had finally compromised that perspective. But I came to recognize something I'd missed during both my early infatuation and my later disaffection: no matter how much I tried to resist my identification with Baldwin, we were uneasy members of the same tribe.

JAMES BALDWIN was disenfranchised from the start. Born James Arthur Jones, in Harlem Hospital, on August 2, 1924, he was the illegitimate child of Emma Berdis Jones, who worked as a cleaning woman to support herself and her son. He never knew his biological father. In 1927, his mother married a Baptist preacher named David Baldwin; together, they reared eight other children, in a series of Harlem tenements. "My mother's strength was only to be called on in a desperate emergency," Baldwin wrote in 1972 in "No Name in the Street." Her eldest child soon learned that his mother "scarcely belonged to us: she was always in the hospital, having another baby." His stepfather was an unforgiving man with a terrible temper, who eventually lost his



James Baldwin in 1967. He contained a multitude of worlds, and those worlds were his true subject.

mind: "Between [the] children, who were terrified of him, the pregnancies, the births, the rats, the murders on Lenox Avenue, the whores who lived downstairs, his job on Long Island—to which he went every morning, wearing a Derby or a Homburg, in a black suit, white shirt, dark tie, looking like the preacher he was, and with his black lunchbox in his hand—and his unreciprocated love for the Great God Almighty, it is no wonder our father went mad."

In the midst of the anger and chaos of this household, the young Baldwin developed an insatiable appetite for literature. He writes in the introductory "Autobiographical Notes" to his first collection of essays, entitled "Notes of a Native Son" and published in 1955, "I read 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' and 'A Tale of Two Cities,' over and over and over. . . In fact, I read just about everything I could get my hands on—except the Bible, probably because it was the only book I was encouraged to read." And, reading in the larger world of books, Baldwin began to see the smallness of the world in which he lived, and to devise ways of escaping. "I knew I was black, of course, but I also knew I was smart," he once said. "I didn't know how I would use my mind. . . but I was going to get whatever I wanted that way, and I was going to get my revenge that way."

Escape was intimately bound up with issues of race. In "Notes of a Native Son" Baldwin recalls that when he was nine or ten he wrote a play that was directed by a young white schoolteacher—"a woman, who then took an interest in me, and gave me books to read, and, in order to corroborate my theatrical bent, decided to take me to see what she somewhat tactlessly referred to as 'real' plays." He goes on, "Theater-going was forbidden in our house, but, with the really cruel intuitiveness of a child, I suspected that the color of this woman's skin would carry the day for me." And it did. David Baldwin could not object to Jimmy's education, because he could not contradict the power that the white woman's skin held in his imagination:

He would have refused permission if he dared. The fact that he did not dare caused me to despise him. . . In later years, particularly when it began to be clear that this "education" of mine was going to lead me to perdition, he became more explicit and warned me that my white friends in high school were not really my friends and that I would see, when I was older, how white people would do anything to keep a Negro down. . . The best thing was to

have as little to do with them as possible. I did not feel this way and I was certain, in my innocence, that I never would.

And so his stepfather's resistance proved a goad to his ambition, spurring him to reconfigure his world by turning difference into strength.

During Baldwin's years at Frederick Douglass Junior High School—from 1935 to 1938—his early ambitions were encouraged by one of the teachers there, the black homosexual writer Countee Cullen, who had enjoyed a vogue during the Harlem Renaissance. Baldwin went on to De Witt Clinton High School, a distinguished—and racially integrated—public school in the Bronx. Among his classmates were the future writer Emile Capouya, the future editor Sol Stein, and the future photographer Richard Avedon, with whom Baldwin coedited the school magazine, *The Magpie*. And as Baldwin began to venture—both literally and metaphorically—out of the neighborhood, some of his stepfather's forebodings began to be realized. Avedon remembers bringing Baldwin home to his family's apartment on the Upper East Side: "The elevator man looked at Jimmy and said, 'You have to go up the back stairs.'"

But even as Baldwin was travelling beyond the boundaries of the black community he was also trying to find his place in it. He underwent a religious conversion when he turned fourteen, began preaching shortly afterward, and proved to be good at it. In the small world of Harlem's Pentecostal churches, he had his first experience of fame, but he took little pleasure in it. "At this time of my life, Emile was the only friend I had who knew to what extent my ministry tormented me," Baldwin wrote many years later, in "The Devil Finds Work" (1976). Capouya believed that his friend remained in the church out of cowardice:

Therefore, on the coming Sunday, he would buy two tickets to a Broadway matinee and meet me on the steps of the 42nd Street Library, at two o'clock in the afternoon. He knew that I spent all day Sunday in church—the point, precisely, of the challenge. . . I had hoped for a reprieve, hoped, on the marked Sunday, to get away unnoticed: but I was the



"young" Brother Baldwin, and I sat in the front row, and the pastor did not begin his sermon until about a quarter past one. Well. At one-thirty, I *tiptoed* out. . . That was how I left the church.

He was seventeen. Shortly afterward, he left home, but he continued to help support his large family, working first at a defense plant in New Jersey, and then at a meatpacking plant in Manhattan. The racism he encountered during this period was debilitating in its unthinking brutality: twelve years later, he described the visceral response it evoked as being like "some dread, chronic disease, the unfeeling symptom of which is a kind of blind fever, a pounding in the skull and fire in the bowels," and he added, "It can wreck more important things than race relations. There is not a Negro alive who does not have this rage in his blood."

DAVID BALDWIN died in 1943, several days before his adopted son's nineteenth birthday. Baldwin buried his stepfather, moved to Greenwich Village, and embarked on a new life as a bohemian. A year later, he met Richard Wright, who championed Baldwin's early efforts at fiction, recommending him to an editor at Harper & Brothers. It was Wright who first gave voice to Baldwin's experience of racism. "He was the greatest black writer in the world for me," Baldwin later recalled, in "Alas, Poor Richard." In "Uncle Tom's Children," in "Native Son," and, above all, in "Black Boy," I found expressed, for the first time in my life, the sorrow, the rage, and the murderous bitterness which was eating up my life. . . His work was an immense liberation and revelation for me."

Through Eugene Worth, a black friend who committed suicide in 1946 (and who inspired the character of Rufus in Baldwin's 1962 novel, "Another Country"), Baldwin was introduced to leftist politics, and in short order the nineteen-year-old writer was a card-carrying Trotskyist, but he didn't remain one long. ("It was useful in that I learned that it may be impossible to indoctrinate me," he wrote in the introduction to his collection of pieces "The Price of the Ticket.") Still, during that time he became acquainted with the intellectuals who would greatly influence the beginning of his career as a writer: Saul Levitas, of *The New Leader*; Randall Jarrell, of *The Nation*; Elliott Cohen and Robert Warshaw, of *Comm-*

tary; and Philip Rahv, of *The Partisan Review*. These editors supported Baldwin's growth as a critic and allowed him access to the social world of New York intellectuals, but their patronage was not without its restrictions: as a black, he was expected and encouraged to review black books. "As for the books I reviewed—well, no one, I suppose, will ever read them again," Baldwin mused. "It was after the war, and Americans were on one of their monotonous conscience 'trips': be kind to niggers, for Christ's sake, be kind to Jews!"

To some extent, Baldwin used his blackness as a kind of surrogate Jewishness: it was his "difference" that sold, and the Jewish intellectuals who knew persecution at first hand could understand racism as persecution of a different hue. Baldwin described the connection himself, in his essay "The Harlem Ghetto," which was published in 1948:

Though the notion of suffering. . . is based on the image of the wandering, exiled Jew, the context changes imperceptibly, to become a fairly obvious reminder of the trials of the Negro. . . At this point, the Negro identifies himself almost wholly with the Jew. The more devout Negro considers that he is a Jew, in bondage to a hard taskmaster and waiting for Moses to lead him out of Egypt.

It is likely that this connection in suffering was clear to him as a citizen of Harlem, where the Jew was stigmatized for his whiteness, just as blacks were marked in the larger world for their blackness. But such observations must have also strengthened his sense of belonging to his new intellectual community.

Certainly this community helped to redefine Baldwin. By 1948, he was no longer the ugliest boy his father had ever seen but a promising young writer who was considered "very smart" by the older editors he worked for. And nothing is more necessary to a writer than attention. "Though it may have cost Saul Levitas nothing to hurl a book at a black boy to see if he could read it and be articulate concerning what he had read, I took it as a vote of confidence. And I loved him. . . and I think. . . that he was proud of me, and that he loved me, too." It is a touchingly vulnerable statement.

The reviews and essays Baldwin wrote for *The Nation* and other magazines are models of linguistic precision and critical acuity. In them he laid the groundwork for the themes he would explore and develop in his later essays: the tensions between blacks and Jews; black stereotypes in

(Advt.)

It is a comfortable, well-worn cliché, but nevertheless quite true, that an entire universe can be contained within the pages of a book. As readers, we are presented with virtually limitless opportunities to explore galaxies infinitely

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"Have we met?"

film; the effect of poverty on everyday life. At the same time, he was developing a style as a writer—a style that blended a full-throated preacherly cadence with the astringent obliquities of a semi-closeted queen.

Baldwin was also struggling to embrace a wider racial vision. At the end of his review of a biography of Frederick Douglass—a review published in *The Nation* in 1947, when Baldwin was only twenty-two—he wrote, "Relations between Negroes and whites, like any other province of human experience, demand honesty and insight; they must be based on the assumption that there is one race and that we are all part of it." At the same time, however, he wasn't trying to "transcend" his race: he was assuming the role of its spokesperson. In a review of Chester Himes's novel "The Lonely Crusade" Baldwin states, "On the low ground where Negroes live something is happening; something which can be measured in decades and generations and which may spell our doom as a republic and almost certainly implies a cataclysm."

IN November, 1948, Baldwin decided to leave the country. Unwilling to end up like his stepfather, "sitting at the window, locked up in his terrors," he used the money from a literary fellowship he'd

won to book passage to Paris. He arrived with just over forty dollars to his name and few contacts other than Richard Wright, who had arrived there two years earlier. But postwar Paris proved to be a refuge for a number of black Americans. And the Parisians, as Baldwin's friend Maya Angelou has said, were delighted with them: they were neither *les misérables* nor Algerians. "France was not without its race prejudices," she recalled in an interview. "It simply didn't have any guilt vis-à-vis black Americans. And black Americans who went there, from Richard Wright to Sidney Bechet, were so colorful, and so talented, and so marvellous, and so exotic. Who wouldn't want them?"

In Paris, Baldwin lived in a variety of hotels, some "ludicrously grim," and he supported himself in a variety of ways. His first summer, he worked as a clerk for a lawyer and he wrote pieces for French and American periodicals. And, for the first time in his life, he borrowed from friends and acquaintances. To live off the largesse of friends takes charm, but that was one resource he had in abundance. "He was able to really charm you, and entertain you, and beguile you, and I suppose seduce you if you were at all ready for it," the poet Richard Howard remembers.

Through Wright, Baldwin was intro-

duced to the editors of the Paris-based magazine *Zéro*, and for them, in 1949, he wrote his first critical piece about his former mentor—a devastating essay entitled "Everybody's Protest Novel." In it Baldwin argued that American protest literature simply confirmed stereotypes about blacks, and that Bigger Thomas, the anti-hero of Wright's 1940 novel, "Native Son," was the spiritual and ideological twin of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom—a victim used as a vessel to project the author's self-righteousness. Baldwin felt confined by political fiction; as he later explained, he wanted to be a writer "instead of a pamphleteer."

Owen Dodson told me that when Baldwin attacked Wright's aesthetic most black intellectuals and academics felt that he had gone too far. Disdainful of intellectual protectionism among blacks, I replied that I guessed that we were not only supposed to look alike but like alike, too. Today, however, as I read Baldwin's essays on Wright and sort through my own jumbled feelings, the truth seems a bit more complicated. Certainly both "Everybody's Protest Novel" and Baldwin's later essay "Alas, Poor Richard" (1961) expressed real misgivings that the younger man had about Wright's work. But these essays—as the title of the second one suggests—also constituted a very personal attack. Baldwin meant not only to bury the tradition of black letters which had its roots in a Communism supported by white dilettantes but also to supersede Wright as the one black writer worth reading in the largely white world of American letters. The Oedipal nature of their relationship was not lost on Baldwin, who once described Wright as "my ally and my witness, and alas! my father."

IT is a similar desire for a father—and an ultimate distance from him—that accounts for most of the pathos of "Go Tell It on the Mountain," Baldwin's first and best novel, which was published, finally, in 1953. (Baldwin had worked on "Mountain"—originally entitled "In My Father's House"—in one form or another for a decade.) The story takes place in the course of a day—the day John, its hero, turns thirteen and is "saved" in the Baptist church where his father preaches. Sharing the stage with John are the dark, troubled "vertical saints." They are his immediate elders: his mother, Elizabeth; his stepfather, Gabriel; and Gabriel's sister

Florence. While John writhes and moans on the "threshing floor," each of them recounts, in flashback, the sins of his or her own past. John's sins—his blackness and his gayness—are part of the filth that he lives in and from which he cannot imagine how to escape. John's "ugliness" is also part of his sin. "His father had always said his face was the face of Satan—and was there not something—in the lift of the eyebrow, in the way his rough hair formed a V on his brow—that bore witness to his father's words? In the eye there was a light that was not the light of Heaven, and the mouth trembled, lustful and lewd, to drink deep in the winds of Hell."

The extraordinary power of "Mountain" arose from Baldwin's ability to convey the warping intensity of an elder's judgment and a child's inability to protect himself from it. John cannot understand why his father despises him, because the fact that the father despises himself does not occur to John. Nor can John imagine being able to escape him: there will never be any reprieve from the memory of his cruelty and its effect.

THE psychic tug-of-war between attraction and rejection was also destined to play itself out in Baldwin's relationships with other men. Shortly after his arrival in Paris, Baldwin met a seventeen-year-old Swiss artist named Lucien Happersberger. The fact that Happersberger was white and Baldwin black was less of a transgression than it would have been back in the States. "In Paris," Baldwin said, "I didn't feel socially attacked, but relaxed, and that allowed me to be loved."

"He was this rather silly, giddy, predatory fellow who was extraordinarily unattractive-looking," Richard Howard recalls. "There's a famous eighteenth-century person who used to say, 'I can talk my face away in twenty-five minutes.' And Jimmy could do that." To a point, perhaps. In the gay demimonde, where looks count for a great deal, Baldwin was not a success, even after he became famous, and he tended to be attracted to straight and bisexual men, who increased the sense of isolation he fed on. Even Lucien, his great love, was primarily attracted to women. For Baldwin, the first principle of love was love withheld; it was all he had ever known.

His second novel, "Giovanni's Room" (1956), traces a tragic affair between two

men—a white American drifter and an Italian bartender amid the bars and *hôtels particuliers* of postwar Paris. The melodramatic plot—in which each man really does kill the thing he loves—creates, in microcosm, the sentimental, histrionic tone of Baldwin's later, unwieldy novels, notably "Another Country."

"Giovanni's Room" isn't exactly self-affirming, but the fact that he wrote about the world of his sexuality at all is extraordinary, given the year and his race. (So intense was the stern Puritanism of most blacks I knew while I was growing up that one was not simply a faggot but a damned faggot.) When "Giovanni's Room" was published, Howard recalls, "it was regarded as an exceptional book, and gay people were proud that such a thing existed. And that it should have been written by a black person was kind of phenomenal."

IT was in Baldwin's essays, unencumbered by the requirements of narrative form, character, and incident, that his voice was most fully realized. And his attacks on the straight-white-boy gatekeepers of culture and politics remain appropriately vicious. In the nineteen-fifties, his most pugnacious contemporary was Norman Mailer. In 1959, the thirty-six-year-old Mailer published "Advertisements for Myself," which contained his essay "Evaluations—Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room." In it, he declares his admiration for James Jones and other major novelists of the time. But of Baldwin he says:

James Baldwin is too charming a writer to be major. If in "Notes of a Native Son" he has a sense of moral nuance which is one of the few modern guides to the sophistications of the ethos, even the best of his paragraphs are sprayed with perfume. Baldwin seems incapable of saying "F— you" to the reader; instead he must delineate the cracking and the breaking and the melting and the hardening of a heart which could never have felt such sensuous growths and little deaths without being emptied as a voice.

Baldwin's subsequent essay about Mailer—"The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," published in 1961—deflates Mailer's macho posturing with his "perfumed" wit: "Norman, I can't go through the world the way you do because I haven't got your shoulders," he writes. He also pits his de-facto

cool credentials against what he depicts as Mailer's privileged white petulance:

The anguish which can overtake a white man comes in the middle of his life, when he must make the almost inconceivable effort to divest himself of everything he has ever expected, or believed, when he must take himself apart and put himself together again, walking out of the world, into limbo or into what certainly looks like limbo. This cannot yet happen to any Negro of Norman's age, for the reason that his delusions and defenses are either absolutely impenetrable by this time, or he has failed to survive them. "I want to know how power works," Norman once said to me, "how it really works, in detail." Well, I know how power works, it has worked on me, and if I didn't know how power worked, I would be dead.

In the same place, Baldwin slyly makes fun of Mailer's infatuation with the predominantly black jazz world. "Negro jazz musicians . . . really liked Norman," he writes. But they "did not for an instant consider him as being even remotely 'hip.' . . . They thought he was a real sweet ofay cat, but a little frantic." Baldwin did not, however, own up to his reciprocal fascination with straight white boys and their privilege. Certainly "Another Country," Baldwin's own "hip" book about interracial sex, gay sex, pot smoking, and nihilism, turned out to be an artistic disaster.

BY the time Baldwin published "Another Country" and the essay collection "Nobody Knows My Name," both in 1962, he had become America's leading black literary star. Both books were commercially successful, but the reviews of "Another Country" were mixed. The novel centers on Rufus, a black male artist, who falls in love with a white Southern woman he meets at a party, and has sex with her on the hosts' balcony. ("He forced her beneath him and he entered her. For a moment she thought she was going to scream, she was so tight. . . . Then,

from the center of his rising storm, very slowly and deliberately, he began the slow ride home. And she carried him, as the sea will carry a boat.") After becoming involved with her, Rufus is tormented by the world that cannot understand their love. He beats her; she ends up in a mental ward; he commits suicide. The subplots, about adultery, bedhopping, and ambition, are equally melodramatic. Elizabeth Hardwick astutely observed in her review for *Harper's*, "In certain re-



spects this novel is a representation of some of the ideas about American life, particularly about the Negro in American life, that Baldwin's essays have touched upon. But what is lacking in the book is James Baldwin himself, who has in his non-fictional writing a very powerful relation to the reader.

In 1962, Baldwin's incantatory voice reached its largest magazine audience. Baldwin had agreed to write a piece about Africa for William Shawn, who was then the editor of *The New Yorker*; instead, he gave Shawn the essay that came to be known as "The Fire Next Time," which had originally been assigned him by Norman Podhoretz, of *Commentary*. The peculiar power of "The Fire Next Time" was intensified by the cultural moment at which it appeared, just as Martin Luther King's nonviolent movement was being overtaken by the violent nationalism of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam.

"The Fire Next Time," which appeared as a Letter from a Region in My Mind, detailed Baldwin's evangelical upbringing and his views on Christianity as a form of slavery forced on and then embraced by blacks: oppression as the condition of black American life. In order to escape "the ghetto mentality" and be a "truly moral human being," it was necessary for anyone, white or black, to first "divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church," Baldwin wrote. "If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him." The godhead with whom many blacks were replacing that Christian god was Allah, as represented by the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. When Baldwin visited him at his home in Chicago, he was impressed by the Nation of Islam's ability to transform some of Harlem's more disreputable characters into Allah-abiding men.

Baldwin was able to maintain a skeptical view of the militancy of the Nation of Islam in his essay, and yet his admiration for strong black men is palpable. At one point, he confesses that upon encountering the Honorable Elijah Muhammad's "marvellous smile" he was reminded of the day, twenty-three years earlier, when he first met the female pastor of what would become his church.

"Whose little boy are you?" she asked him. And Baldwin's orphaned heart cried out, "Why, yours!"

WITH the publication of "The Fire Next Time" in book form, in 1963, Baldwin became something of an intellectual carpetbagger. He undertook a lecture tour for the Congress on Racial Equality; he registered voters in Alabama for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; he travelled to Nairobi with



Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier to celebrate Kenya's independence. On May 17th, he appeared on the cover of *Time*. William Styron recalls seeing Baldwin in an airport shortly after the book came out: "He was being followed by crews of TV reporters with microphones. He saw me from a distance, and waved, and then he was swept along by the great media wave." An essayist once known for his ability to question any party line had become the official voice of black America, and almost immediately his voice as a writer was compromised.

In 1964, Baldwin was asked by Lee Strasberg, then the director of the Actors Studio, to stage a play about the Emmett Till case, which the writer had been working on intermittently since 1958. As originally conceived, by Baldwin and Frank Cosaro, who was slotted to direct it, the play, "Blues for Mister Charlie," was to be a "balanced view" of America's racial scene. Baldwin, Cosaro says, wanted as objective a view of Mister Charlie—the white man—as of his victim, and Cosaro was impressed by that. But Baldwin couldn't ignore the political influence of the black leaders he was becoming friendly with. "He then came back to me and Strasberg," Cosaro recalls, "and said that he had to go after Mister Charlie." The result was dutiful, turgid, and unconvincing.

Baldwin had always been a preacher of one sort or another, and preaching imminent earthly damnation to liberal white folks became increasingly irresistible. Even as early as 1960, Baldwin, standing in front of Styron's fireplace in Connecticut, told his host, "Baby, we are going to burn your motherfucking houses down." By 1968, Baldwin found impersonating a black writer more seductive than being an artist. That year, he went to Hollywood to write a screen

adaptation of "The Autobiography of Malcolm X." The producer, Marvin Worth, recalls, "White liberals were thrilled to have him come into their Beverly Hills houses and beat them up, say they were shit. He was a star who played on white masochism."

The irony, however, was that no matter how much Baldwin sacrificed his gifts to gain acceptance from the Black Power movement, his gestures went unrequited: while Baldwin may have been seen as a "bad nigger" by liberal whites, back in the hood he was just another twisted white boy in blackface. Eldridge Cleaver, in his 1968 "Soul on Ice," called Baldwin "a self-willed, automated slave" and "the white man's most valuable tool in oppressing other blacks." And yet, even after he'd been vilified by Cleaver, his response was appeasing and reverential. In "No Name in the Street" (1972) Baldwin referred to Cleaver as "valuable and rare," and excused his intolerance as the vigilance of "a zealous watchman on the city wall." And it is difficult to read Baldwin's description of Huey Newton in the same essay without wincing:

There is in him a dedication as gentle as it is unyielding, absolutely single-minded. I began to realize this when I realized that Huey was always listening and always watching. No doubt he can be fooled, he's human, though he certainly can't be fooled easily; but it would be a very great mistake to try to lie to him. Those eyes take in everything, and behind the juvenile smile, he keeps a complicated scorebook.

Baldwin's biographer, David Leeming, told me that many of the civil-rights leaders didn't want to be associated with Baldwin, because he was so openly gay; it seems to have been why the organizers of the 1963 March on Washington pointedly ignored him. In the end, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver were reincarnations of his withholding and judgmental preacher father.

By the time the Black Power movement had started to ebb, Baldwin was adrift not only politically but aesthetically. Throughout the nineteen-seventies, Styron and Mailer were working on ambitious books like "Sophie's Choice" and "The Executioner's Song." Thomas Pynchon was breaking new ground with "Gravity's Rainbow," and a prolific new generation of black women—Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison—was claiming the public's

imagination. Baldwin's fastidious thought process and his baroque sentences suddenly seemed hopelessly outdated, at once self-aggrandizing and ingratiating. Nevertheless, up until his death, in 1987, at the age of sixty-three, Baldwin continued to harbor the hope that he would be embraced as an important literary figure by the army of his desire: the black men who had forsaken him.

WHAT became clear to me as I reread Baldwin's work (the Library of America selection mercifully excludes his ill-conceived and poorly written plays, "The Amen Corner" and "Blues for Mister Charlie," and the novels written after "Another Country") is that he never possessed a novelist's imagination or sense of structure—or, indeed, a novelist's interest in the lives of other people. Nor was he a reporter: most of his reporting pieces were stiff and banal. He was at his best when he was writing about some aspect of life or politics that reflected his interior self: he contained a multitude of worlds, and those worlds were his true subject.

But I also realized that my acute awareness of Baldwin's weaknesses as a writer stemmed from my sense of kinship with him. Certainly Baldwin understood this particular kind of ambivalence, having written the following at thirty-six, the age I am now:

One of my dearest friends, a Negro writer now living in Spain, circled around me and I around him for months before we spoke. One Negro meeting another at an all-white cocktail party... cannot but wonder how the other got there. The question is: Is he for real? Or is he kissing ass?... Negroes know about each other what can here be called family secrets, and this means that one Negro, if he wishes, can "knock" the other's "hustle"... Therefore, one "exceptional" Negro watches another "exceptional" Negro in order to find out if he knows how vastly successful and bitterly funny the hoax has been.

Baldwin had been eying the competition long before he was paid to do so by any white editor. In "Notes of a Native Son" Baldwin writes that he and his stepfather circled around each other endlessly before they had their only significant conversation. One Sunday afternoon, they were walking home from church when David Baldwin broke their habitual silence:

My father asked me abruptly, "You'd rather write than preach, wouldn't you?"

I was astonished at his question—because it was a real question. I answered, "Yes."

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- 8 pINTO
- 9 HOMER (2 def.)
- 11 NEGATIVE (*Excita + gen. rev.*)
- 12 TERN (*turn* hom.)
- 15 ULNA (hidden)
- 16 PUMP(KIN)S
- 18 LISTS (2 def.)
- 19 EPEE (hidden rev.)
- 20 FE(T)E
- 21 ADO + RED

DOWN

- 1 QUINTUPL(ED) (anag.)
- 2 pURGE
- 3 A + NAG + RAMS
- 4 R(I)OTS
- 5 STEVEN (anag.)
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But in the end Baldwin could not distinguish between writing sermons and making art. He eventually returned to the pulpit—just where his stepfather had always wanted him to be.

Yet there is one great Baldwin masterpiece waiting to be published—one that was composed in an atmosphere of focussed intimacy rather than in the stiff black preacher suit that was his legacy—and that is a volume of his letters. A number of them were lent to me while I was doing research for this article; they have the force and wit of his early essays and the immediacy of something written for an audience of one.

After Baldwin's death, the family's

relation to their prodigal son continues to reflect the hazards of uttering family secrets. When I asked David Leeming why the Baldwin family would not allow his letters to be published, he explained that the family felt he shed a negative light on them, particularly on David Baldwin, who was their father and not his; and they were uncomfortable with his homosexuality. "They have no interest in further exploring who he was," Leeming says. The family's uneasiness with the private Baldwin is something that he himself always understood. And yet he left his legacy in their hands. In the end, even a bastard may be reclaimed by his family. ♦

DEATH BECOMES HER

America as an imaginary country with real corpses in it.

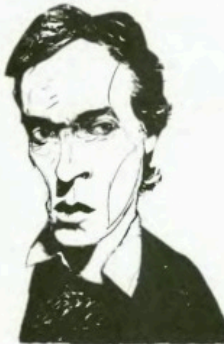
BY JOHN LANCHESTER

NIGHT TRAIN," Martin Amis's ninth novel, is his first to take place entirely in the United States; specifically, in a "second-echelon American city, mildly famed for its Jap-finance Babel Tower, its harbors and marinas, its university, its futuristically enlightened corporations (computer software, aerospace, pharmaceuticals), its high unemployment, and its catastrophic inner-city taxpayer flight." Our brief

moment of speculation—Baltimore? Philadelphia?—is as pointless as trying to identify the exact model for P.G. Wodehouse's Blandings Castle. For Amis, place has more to do with topography than with topography. His West London is as lovingly detailed an imaginary space as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. It's a place of authorial high intellect, behavioral low comedy, and, above all, poetic exaggeration, where a car left on the street ends up looking like "an igloo of parking-tickets and birdcrap," where working-class characters live in tower blocks with dogs called

racial snooker clubs full of "no-colour Brits, indistinguishable, it seemed, from the great genies of cigarette smoke that moved between the tables like the ghosts of referees."

If West London is the main stamping ground for Amis's imagination, America is his Other Place, his fictive home away from home. It's an America assembled mainly out of books and films and TV shows and fevered European dreams—an imaginary country that has more in common with the Africa of Saul Bellow's "Henderson the Rain King" or John Updike's "The Coup" than it does with anything in Rand McNally. More than four hundred years ago, John Donne apostrophized his girlfriend as "my America, my new-found-land"; to this day, European fantasies about America tend to be about newness and sex. And, of course, violence. In "The Information," Richard Tull, on his first visit to New York, "knew, the instant he arrived on its streets, that New York was the most violent thing that men had ever done to a



Martin Amis

stretch of land, more violent, in its way, than what was visited on Hiroshima, at ground zero, on day one."

It doesn't necessarily feel that way if you live there; but in Amis's scheme of things that doesn't matter much. "I would certainly sacrifice any psychological or realistic truth for a phrase, for a paragraph that has a spin on it," he has said. "That sounds whorish, but I think it's the higher consideration. Mere psychological truth in a novel doesn't seem to me all that valuable a commodity. I would sooner let the words prompt me, rather than anything I was representing." Well, it doesn't sound whorish, but it does sound unlike what novelists usually do. In fact, a working definition of a novelist might be someone who tells stories in prose and doesn't agree with that statement of Amis's. But there's an important sense in which Amis is not so much a novelist as a poet, for whom the apparatus of plot and character is merely scaffolding, and for whom the real project is to make unforgettable sentences. These sentences have made him the most admired, imitated, influential British writer of the last twenty years. (In Britain, unfortunately for him, he is also a kind of lightning rod for feelings of envy and ill will: the journalistic treatment of him has an almost surreal hostility.)

The latest narrator to stand as the dummy for Amis's inspired ventriloquism is Detective Mike Hoolihan, a forty-four-year-old policewoman "with coarse blonde hair, bruiser's tits and broad shoulders, and pale blue eyes in her head that have seen everything." Hoolihan does tend to sound more like an Amis narrator—the thirty-five-year-old Cockney advertising man John Self in "Money," say, or the terminally ill American writer Samson Young in "London Fields"—than like anyone else; but when her voice is so wonderfully funny, misanthropic, foul-mouthed, and street-smart who cares? Here she is, musing on the copycat effect: "You get copycat with suicides, too. Fuck yes. . . . Some asshole of a bass guitarist chokes on his own ralph (or fries on his own amplifier)—and suddenly suicide is all over town." That tough-broad note, however, is not the only one in Hoolihan's register. She is troubled and moved by the story she is telling, so much so that at times "Night Train" feels like a rebuttal to the charges of misogyny and unfeeling cool

that have been levelled against its creator.

The central mystery of the novel concerns the suicide of Hoolihan's family friend Jennifer Rockwell, a "drop-dead beautiful," "to-die-for brilliant" twenty-something cosmologist. Jennifer's home life seems perfectly happy and stable (she's the daughter of a high-ranking police officer, and the offspring of a "forty-year marriage that still had fucking in it"); she's in what seems to be a deliriously happy and stable long-term relationship with a philosopher boyfriend. And then, one Sunday evening, she shoots herself in the head with a .22 revolver.

At first, Hoolihan thinks that Jennifer's suicide is inexplicable: "A woman fell out of a clear blue sky." Then she begins to find what look like reasons: the toxicology report reveals that Jennifer had been taking lithium; behind her boyfriend's back, she had made an assignation with a wildly unsuitable man in a hotel bar; at work, she had perpetrated a catastrophic mistake that came to light the day after her suicide. The clincher is Jennifer's suicide note, which appears to confirm that she had been suffering from manic depression.

Then Hoolihan finds, in Jennifer's apartment, a book called "Making Sense of Suicide," in which Jennifer has marked a passage stating that "virtually all known studies reveal that the suicidal person will give warnings and clues as to his, or her, suicidal intentions." Hoolihan comes to believe that all the clues—the lithium, the hotel pickup, and so on—are fake, planted by Jennifer to conceal the real reason for her self-murder. It wouldn't be fair to give away this reason, but it bears on Hoolihan's intuition "that the death of Jennifer Rockwell was offering the planet a piece of new news: Something never seen before."

"Night Train," like all Amis's mature fiction, seeks to be at once a crystalline verbal artifact and a work of deep feeling. The novel draws its energies equally from the linguistic pyrotechnics of Nabokov and the human immensities of Bellow (and, incidentally, it's to the Bells that the book is dedicated). It sounds unlikely—indeed, it is unlikely—but the outcome is sentence after sentence that nobody else could have written. "Night Train" isn't a whodunit, or even a whydunit, but it may be the first work of a new, very Amisian, and postmodern genre, the whynotdunit. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

NO LEASE ON LIFE, by Lynne Tillman (Harcourt Brace; \$21). Tillman observes the Aristotelian unities, mostly from the window of a Lower East Side tenement, where her heroine, Elizabeth Hall (a.k.a. Lizard), spends an insomniac twenty-four hours meticulously cataloguing the passing indignities: car alarms, indifferent police, crackheads in the vestibule. It's a jeremiad (interrupted by jokes that serve as both Greek chorus and local graffiti) so convincing that it makes footnotes of the day's banner news: O.J. driving to Brentwood is a minor event compared with Lizard tossing eggs at the "morons" around a boom box.

THE WONDER WORKER, by Susan Howatch (Knopf; \$25.95). In this eminently readable plum pudding, everyone who sticks in his thumb pulls out a prize: Alice, a *cardon bleu* chef who's freed by her great-aunt's death to stir up a new life; Lewis, an elderly priest doubly beset by lust and his late great-uncle Cuthbert; Nicholas, a charismatic healer; and his wife, Rosalind, a Sloane Ranger manqué turned flower freak. The setting is St. Benet's, a London parish church, and while every character displays a level of eccentricity verging on the gothic, Howatch's good-humored tone keeps the whole—just—from collapsing.

TR.: THE LAST ROMANTIC, by H. W. Brands (Basic; \$35). Theodore Roosevelt remains the most perplexing of our great men, and this engaging, intimate biography explores both his achievements and his incongruities (his reforms at a time when American business and government were as corrupt as any modern Third World country's; his evolution from a shoot-anything-that-moves hunter to a founding father of the American conservation movement). If there is something childish about his unflinching gusto, there is something winning, too, and though Brands is by no means uncritical, the reader feels (and shares) his attraction to his subject.

THE PLEASURES OF THE IMAGINATION, by John Brewer (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; \$40). No century is like another, of course. But the eighteenth century in England witnessed an early emanation of self-consciousness no less transforming than that of the Renaissance. It was also, Brewer says, a time when the arts shifted in relation to their audience, and he traces that shift in music, painting, literature, and spectacle. The result is a well-written aesthetic and social history of wide-ranging satisfactions.

NEVER LET ME DOWN, by Susan J. Miller (Holt; \$22.50). Miller's father would have been a light on his family even without being a secret-drug-addict hipster. He was judgmental and self-centered—never noticing, for example, that his son was regularly and brutally beating his daughter. Yet it was only when, at twenty-one, she learned about his addiction that she could begin the process of unravelling the pain and mystery of her working-class, intellectual Jewish family. This elegantly constructed memoir is precise, insightful, and strangely healing to read.