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The Fire Next Time



Synopsis

A national bestseller when it first appeared in 1963, *The Fire Next Time* galvanized the nation and gave passionate voice to the emerging civil rights movement. At once a powerful evocation of James Baldwin's early life in Harlem and a disturbing examination of the consequences of racial injustice, the book is an intensely personal and provocative document. It consists of two "letters," written on the occasion of the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, that exhort Americans, both black and white, to attack the terrible legacy of racism. Described by *The New York Times* Book Review as "sermon, ultimatum, confession, deposition, testament, and chronicle...all presented in searing, brilliant prose," *The Fire Next Time* stands as a classic of our literature. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I was born in 1968, six years after *The Fire Next Time* was published - I lived the period that Baldwin chronicles vicariously through my parents. There are few essayists who equal Baldwin's gift for finding the right phrase to communicate a concept, both intellectually and emotionally. Indeed it's the emotion that Baldwin so effectively weaves into his prose that gives *The Fire Next Time* its impact. At its core, this essay is a plea. Baldwin dissects the nature of Black-White relations in the early sixties. He rejects the both the pandering of White liberals and the separatist rhetoric of Black radicals as simplistic; the former as condescending and insincere and the latter as unrealistic and reactionary. The conclusion that he reaches is that Blacks and Whites, whether they realize it or not,

are locked in a symbiotic relationship, and destruction for one will mean destruction for both. Put positively, however, the key to their salvations are linked. No one is free until all are free. Baldwin focuses on two important anecdotes. The first deals with his seduction by the church, his brief career as a child minister, and his subsequent rejection of Christianity. The second deals with an encounter with Elijah Muhammad, then leader of the Nation of Islam. Both show religion as an escape mechanism, and both are told with a convincing immediacy and a sense of candor. Baldwin's rejection of Christianity appears to be a crucial step in his awakening, and in his rejection of the beliefs that 60's White society expected Black people to hold. The church for Baldwin was an escape mechanism, but having been consoled he soon fled the church, overwhelmed by its hypocrisy and abuses, both historical and current. He concludes "...whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being...must first divorce himself for all of the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church." In the end Baldwin refuses to accept Christianity's (and, by implication, White society's) definition of him as the descendent of Ham, cursed forever. Baldwin turns the same critical eye on the Nation of Islam. He's sympathetic to the emotions and suffering that have pushed Black people into internalizing the NOI's separatist rhetoric, but he recognizes that this will not be the salvation of the Black community. Baldwin writes "...the Negro has been formed by this nation, for better or for worse, and does not belong to any other - not to Africa, and certainly not to Islam. The paradox...is that the American Negro can have no future anywhere, on any continent, as long as he is unwilling to accept his past." Despite his cutting commentary on 60's White society, Baldwin in his heart is an integrationist. His rejection of the Nation of Islam and their philosophy is his rejection of the idea of adopting the very tactics that Whites have used against Blacks; "Whoever debases other is debasing himself", he states emphatically. Baldwin understands imitation and aggression as a tactic, but he finds awe not in an eye-for-an-eye, but in a community who's dignity has produced children of kindergarten age capable of walking through a mob to get to their schoolhouse. Not every metaphor which Baldwin uses in this essay works, and he does at time stray in his musings, but as a snapshot of the state of America in the sixties The Fire Next Time is a powerful piece of writing. As I read this book there were passages with which I identified personally; sentiments that I myself have felt but could never have articulated so effectively. There were other passages in which I was an outsider looking in. As a Black American reading this essay some forty years after it was published, this gives me a good yardstick as to how far America has come, and in what areas we are still lacking.

James Baldwin caused quite a stir in 1961 when he published "Letter from a Region in My Mind" in

The New Yorker, followed by "A Letter to My Nephew" in The Progressive the next month. He collected these two essays in this small volume, and it's considered (along with "Notes of a Native Son") his best work. His biting, heartfelt analysis on race relations flings its barbs equally at the legacy of American white supremacy and the duplicity of liberal white guilt; although it was written more than forty years ago, it reminds us both how far we've come and how far we have yet to go. Baldwin frames his observations around two thematically related biographical episodes: his brief three-year stint as an adolescent Pentecostal preacher in Harlem in the early 1940s and his journalistic visit to the headquarter of the Nation of Islam in Chicago's South Side twenty years later. Both institutions, Baldwin finds, suffer from an ambivalent myopia: Christianity in general "helped to protect and sanctify the power that was so ruthlessly being used by people who were indeed seeking a city, but not one in the heavens, and one to be made, very definitely, by captive hands"; the Nation of Islam "inculcated in the demoralized Negro population a truer and more individual sense of its own worth" through the "fearful paradox" of creating a hopeful future with "an invented past." Blacks, he seems to say, have traded in the belief system forced on them by their oppressors to a understandable longing for an illusory past. His conclusion is aggressive but perceptive: "the Negro has been formed by this nation, for better or for worse, and does not belong to any other--not to Africa, and certainly not to Islam." But that's only half the story--or certainly less than half. Baldwin has far more to say about this nation's white majority; the underlying subject is the predicament of "'the so-called American Negro,' who remains trapped, disinherited, and despised in a nation that has kept him bondage for nearly four hundred years and is still unable to recognized him as human being." Baldwin correctly posits that, historically, the usual recourse by an oppressed group in such desperate circumstances has been violent upheaval. Throughout history--white history--it is incontrovertible that "violence and heroism have been made synonymous," from the Norman Invasion to the American Revolution. And, indeed, in such a nation as ours, "there is no reason that black men should be expected to be more patient, more forbearing, more farsighted than white; indeed, quite the contrary." Despite the historical legacy and Baldwin's dire warnings of the potential for bloodshed, Baldwin nevertheless remains cautiously hopeful for the future, and he predicted--correctly, notwithstanding church bombings and assassinations and riots--that integration and civil rights victories and black advancement might be achieved with relatively little violence, certainly when compared to the horrors other revolutions have engendered. For one thing, blacks had--and have--an advantage: they understand, all too well, white Americans, while the reverse is not--and has never been--true: "Ask any Negro what he knows about the white people with whom he works. And then ask the white people with whom he works what they know about him." For

another, American black history has, if anything, been testimony "to nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible." Only by acknowledging the past and confronting the future Americans can "achieve our country, and change the history of the world."

Of all of the great authors of the 20th century, James Baldwin was probably closest, both in style and moral authority, to some of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. "The Fire Next Time," first published back in 1963, represents Baldwin at his most impassioned. This book consists of an open letter to Baldwin's nephew, along with an extended autobiographical essay. Throughout the book, Baldwin writes with insight and compassion about the complexities of race in the United States. Baldwin writes of his spiritual crisis as a teenager--a crisis which led to his career as a youth minister in an African-American Christian church. He writes bitterly of his ultimate disillusionment with the emptiness and hypocrisy he found in the church. Baldwin also writes of his meeting with Elijah Muhammad, the fiery leader of the Nation of Islam sect and mentor to controversial Black leader Malcolm X. Baldwin's testament is a harsh critique of 20th century Christendom. Reflecting upon the rise of the Nazis in one of the world's most "Christian" nations, Baldwin declares, "From my own point of view, the fact of the Third Reich alone makes obsolete forever any question of Christian superiority, except in technological terms." "The Fire Next Time" is both an illuminating historical document of a turbulent era, and a superb piece of literary craftsmanship. All those interested in the art of nonfiction prose should take time to experience Baldwin's mastery of the medium. But even more importantly, we should all take time to consider his ideas on race, on religion, on prejudice, and on hope.

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