



Notes of a Native Son

James Baldwin

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Since its original publication in 1955, this first nonfiction collection of essays by James Baldwin remains an American classic. His impassioned essays on life in Harlem, the protest novel, movies, and African Americans abroad are as powerful today as when they were first written.

--back cover

Notes of a Native Son Details

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From Reader Review Notes of a Native Son for online ebook

Elyse says

This is my 3rd James Baldwin book this year.first time as an audiobook.

"Notes of A Native Son", is a great intro. into other books Baldwin has written.

These 'notes' are a collection of essays -- written when Baldwin was in his 20's during the 1940's and early 50's. It was fascinating learning about Baldwin as a young man and his experiences being Black in America through the civil rights movement-- and steps forward. His memories about unfairness is piercing. I felt his bitterness - then re-visited my sadness of injustice when Baldwin wrote -- [SPOKEN LOUDLY on the audiobook]. "Black is a terrible color in which to be born into this world".

James Baldwin writes beautiful. He covers complicated themes.. racism in America- Traditions for the black man -isolation within the black community- He talks about his attempts to better understand his father whom he had a strained relationship with.

Search for identity and pride is an ongoing battle.

Rigorous.... significant.... relevant issues!

James Baldwin articulates what it means to be a Black American and be an American --giving insight about the truth and struggles -- and how shameful these truths have been.

Timeless and Tremendous!

Sophie says

Το πρ?το πρ?γμα που σημει?νει ο Baldwin στο *Autobiographical notes ε?ναι: I was born in Harlem....* Μια απλ? και σ?ντομη φρ?ση που ?μως κατατοπ?ζει πλ?ρως τον αναγν?στη, κι εκε?νον που πρ?τη φορ? ?ρχεται σε επαφ? με τον συγκεκριμ?νο συγγραφ?α, ως προς τη σημασ?α που ?χει η κληρονομι? και το *birthright* στο ?ργο του.

It is difficult to make clear that he is not seeking to forfeit his birthright as a black man, but that, on the contrary, it is precisely this birthright which he is struggling to recognize and make articulate.

Με την αν?ληψη των λογοτεχνικ?ν καθηκ?ντων του ο συγγραφ?ας οφε?λει, σ?μφωνα με τον Baldwin, να προσμετρ?σει τους παραπ?νω παρ?γοντες στο ?ργο του, να ε?ναι *living proof of his inheritance* και να διεκδικ?σει το *birthright* του ως μα?ρος. Στην εισαγωγ? της ?κδοσης του 1984 υπογραμμ?ζει πως

The conundrum of color is the inheritance of every American, be he/she legally or actually Black or White.

Η γραφή του, ως εκ τοῦτου, αντανακλά με συνπεια το ασθημα της εσωτερικής διαμόχησης εντός ανθρώπου που γεννθήκε στους κλπούς της μαρτυρητικής, μιας συντηρητικής, αδικαστης και ξνής προς τη φροντίδα κοινωνίας, γνώτας ταυτόχρονα μερος εντός μεγαλύτερου κοινωνικού περιθωριοποίησης εν γνει, απορρίπτει τον ψυχισμό του και βασίζει τις αντιδράσεις πνω στο χρήμα δρματος του κοινωνίας ανθρώπου.

It is part of the price the Negro pays for his position in this society that, as Richard Wright points out, he is almost always acting. A Negro learns to gauge precisely what reaction the alien person facing him desires, and he produces it with disarming artlessness.

Στο εισαγωγικό κείμενο της συλλογής ο Baldwin ασχολείται και διερευνά το ζητήμα του συγγραφέα, με την αναγκαιότητα να γράφει την αληθεία για τον κοινωνικό οποίο ζει κι από τον οποίο αφορμέται, να πηγαίνει στην πηγή του προβλημάτου, πράσινη από την επιφύλεξη, και να εξετάζει τις συμπεριφορές, με τη δυσκολία του να εννοεί μερος συγγραφέας ταν το *Negro problem* δεν αντιμετωπίζεται πως κατέγνω μη του πρόπει.

In the context of the Negro problem neither the whites nor blacks, for excellent reasons of their own, have the faintest desire to look back; but I think the past is all that makes the present coherent, and further, that the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly.

Εντούτοις ο Baldwin διακατέχεται από αξιοσημείωτη και μαχια ανθρωπιά, δεν προβάγει σε συναισθηματική υστερία, ωθεί τον εαυτό του να βρίσκεται στον αντίποδα της πικράς ως προς τους λευκούς, πικρά που πως ισχυρίζεται ταν ο καταλότης του θανάτου του πατέρα του. Δε διστάζει να κρίνει γνωστή και αγαπημένη ργα ως προβληματική, μεταξύ άλλων το Uncle Tom's Cabin, για τον υπερβολική συναισθηματισμό, για την ανειλική νεία της απεικόνισης του μαρτυρού, λογοτατός:

I am not one of the people who believe that oppression imbues a people with wisdom or insight or sweet charity, though the survival of the Negro in this country would simply not have been possible if this bitterness had been all he felt.

Ο Baldwin εννοεί της λογοτεχνίας, του λογοτατού, κατανοεί τη σημασία του να διενεται και στους λευκούς χαρακτήρες των ργων υπόσταση πλρως ανεπτυγμένου ντος, υποστηρίζοντας με θρμή πως

You do not have to fully humanize your black characters by dehumanizing the white ones.

Πράσινη από το καφκικό βεληνεκό επεισδιο της πολυμερης φυλήκισης του στο Παράσι - ταν του δωρθήκε να σεντνι κλεμμένο, εν αγνοά του, από κοποίο ξενοδοχείο - στο κείμενο του *Journey to Atlanta* ο λογοτατός του γνεται σκωπτικής, πολιτικής, κι η ιστορία εννοεί να προειδοποιητική διηγημά για μαρτυρους πολιτικής και λευκούς ριζοσπαστικής και φίλελεθερους, οι οποίοι με αμφιλογίες μεταμφίζουν ναν πατερναλισμό που βλέπει λους τους μαρτυρους ως παίδια.

*The American commonwealth chooses to overlook what Negroes are never able to forget: they are not really considered a part of it. Like Aziz in *A Passage to India* or Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, they know that white people, whatever their love for justice, have no love for them. This is the crux of the matter.*

Το στοιχείο ωστέσο που διαπερνά το κείμενο εννοεί μλλον το αισιόδοξο βλέμμα του Baldwin,

ακ?μη κι ?ταν εκε?νο που περιγρ?φει ε?ναι η αθλι?τητα του να ε?ναι κ?ποιος μα?ρος στην Αμερικ?. Χρησιμοποι?ντας τα λ?για του ανθρ?που που π?νω απ' ?λα ?θελε να ε?ναι ειλικριν?ς ?νθρωπος και καλ?ς συγγραφ?ας:

This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art.

Aloke says

Very well written and powerful. And worth rereading. The introduction by Edward Jones, a well-known author in his own right, was also good. I want to read his *The Known World*.

My only criticism would be that I found Part I slow going and would recommend casual readers come back to it later. Although touching on Baldwin's usual themes they revolve around the books "Uncle Tom's Cabin", "Native Son" and the movie "Carmen Jones" and I haven't read/seen these so I didn't understand a lot of what he was talking about. I'd revisit these essays if I read those books and they would make more sense, but I feel like they still might be a little too elliptical for me.

I've checked out the Library of America collected essays which includes this and a ton of other essays which I'm looking forward to reading: *Collected Essays: Notes of a Native Son / Nobody Knows My Name / The Fire Next Time / No Name in the Street / The Devil Finds Work / Other.*

Miroku Nemeth says

I just finished James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son" yesterday. Published in 1955, it has lost none of its relevance on many levels, and one of these is his argument that the representations of African Americans in and through literature and in movies and the role in which devices such as the "protest novel" are used to assuage liberal guilt and really do not bring about true societal change and instead foster a false sense of understanding and identification that still maintains the "otherness" of the group whose problems or issues are addressed in the work. Baldwin sometimes goes on tirades that are not always perhaps balanced but he interrogates issues so passionately and thoroughly and unconventionally that he really makes you think deeply about the gap between professed understanding and experienced reality.

I think of this because I teach many African American works of literature to predominantly non-African American students whose backgrounds vary in understanding of issues of race, class, etc. And there is also the issue of racism itself--not as a personal issue alone, for almost all Americans can repeat the platitudes and provide anecdotes as to why they are not racist--but few truly understand institutional racism. Their minds go blank when you make the shift in discourse and you can see it on many white people's faces. And so it is with many issues of social justice and oppression that do not conform to the conventional model of discourse.

I say this because it is actually a struggle to try and teach on these issues in all their complexity and basic reality, perhaps even more so now that Obama is president because this phenomena is misunderstood so deeply on many sides of the racial divide.

Just some reflections prompted, in part, by this reading. I think it is instructive to look at Malcolm's position relative to white liberals--while he felt that it was better that the "conservative" wolf at least told you who he was straight up, the liberal "fox" should be seen as just as dangerous. This said, he saw great potential in young white college students and others who sincerely wanted change, and he mentions this clearly in his Autobiography.

There is, essentially, a very difficult problem in determining who "speaks" for a "people" and what the true limits of that speech are--many, many voices are disconnected from the grass roots, while still others, sometimes as demagogues, shape them.

Sebastien says

Scorching per usual with Baldwin.

The first essays feature criticism/analysis of the arts, quite interesting but not my favorite part of the book.

The essays on his father (particularly devastating, sad, insightful) and living in France were my favorites. Deeply powerful, moving essays.

His experience with the French justice system (l'affaire du drap de lit) is completely surreal but believable, the epitome of kafkaesque. It is terrifying, he gets sucked into the blackhole of the French prison system because he is wrongly suspected of stealing... a bed sheet. Baldwin weaves in some brilliant humor into this essay, although he is always making serious points through out. Maybe as a French person I found his observations even funnier, but they struck me as pretty accurate and interesting. Plus Baldwin has a great knack for interweaving comedic jabs into his serious observations/ideas. The matter of fact observation pointing out the old man permanently standing next to the communal toilet eating camembert struck me as particularly hilarious because it was so dryly noted and I was like that is so ridiculous it has to be true. Can't get us Frenchies away from our damn camembert even in the vortex of prison.

Baldwin writes with power, precision, perception, coupled with brutal honesty. He crafts and explains his ideas and thinking so well, I love his imagery and flips of language and turns of phrase. His writing is never showboaty although it is extremely finely crafted, no matter how fancy he gets it always serves his purpose in getting a point across (his skill allowing him to zero in on the heart of his themes/ideas with highest degree of nuance and perception). He drills deep down on subjects, amazingly perceptive and startling ability to unravel the complex.

It's sad to know how much pain he suffered, he alludes to the monumental fury and anger he tried to keep tamped down because if he allowed that dam to burst those things would have destroyed him from the inside out. The anger is counterbalanced by his high degree of wit and razor burning sarcasm.

His on point observations on race, identity, white supremacy, the human condition, cultural/societal analysis remain highly relevant to our age.

Cannot wait to read more of his work.

leynes says

MY VIDEO ESSAY ON THIS BOOK: <https://youtu.be/vFBHQEfsl0>

You might be surprised by the low rating but, unfortunately, I can't justify a higher one. James Baldwin is an author I deeply admire and look up to. He is an incredibly talented writer and I want to read his complete bibliography. I'm surprised myself that I didn't click with *Notes of a Native Son*. I was so sure that I would love it but alas! it didn't work for me.

The story of the Negro in America is the story of America – or, more precisely, it is the story of Americans. It is not a very pretty story: the story of a people is never pretty.

Notes of a Native Son (1955) is the first nonfiction book by James. It collects ten essays surrounding the issues of race in the US and Europe (mainly France, and later Switzerland).

It's interesting to read Baldwin's earlier writings, especially when one is familiar with his subsequent brilliant books such as *The Fire Next Time* or *If Beale Street Could Talk*. It becomes apparent that it took Baldwin some years before he eventually found his voice. I will elaborate on this point later, it felt like he knew (content-wise) what he wanted to say but just not **how** to express it properly.

Prior to *Native Son*, Baldwin didn't have the best experience with the publishing industry. After the completion of *Giovanni's Room*, a novel which focuses on a homosexual relationship, he was told by Publisher's Row that he 'was a young Negro writer, who, if he published this book, would alienate his audience and ruin his career.' His publisher looked on *Giovanni's Room* with horror and loathing, and refused to touch it.

This is purely my own speculation: I think that these experiences played their part in how James saw himself and his work. Being branded a 'Negro writer' isn't necessarily an advantage.

I don't like people who like me because I'm a Negro; neither do I like people who find in the same accident grounds for contempt. I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually. [...] I have many responsibilities, but none greater than this: to last, as Hemingway says, and get my work done. I want to be an honest man and a good writer.

Baldwin's aim is a noble one: to write about the experience of African-American people in the US and showcase the issues with the system of institutionalized racism. In my opinion, he took upon this task to soon and didn't manage to express an universal wisdom like he did in later years. [And who can judge him, homeboy was 30 years old when he wrote *Native Son*.]

His voice comes off as aloof, detached and overly erudite – hard to access for no good reason. I genuinely felt that Baldwin lacked feeling for his audience. At times, it felt like he was writing for an exclusive circle of white academics. His choice of words and the perspectives he chose to write from really didn't work for me. I felt very disconnected from him, and thus from the happenings he was writing about. Let's take a sentence like this:

It is an aspect of his humiliation whittled down to a manageable size and then transferred; it is the best form the Negro has for tabulating vocally his long record of grievances against his native land.

Native Son is littered with words that are overblown for no reason. It rubbed me the wrong way how Baldwin positioned himself within these stories. As if he were an unfazed observer who talked about/for people rather than letting them speak for themselves.

He begins a lot of his sentences with constructs like this:

The American Negro cannot explain to the African what ...

Yet one day he will face ...

It occurs to him that ...

His language feels oddly impersonal and overbearing. I really feel like he took the easy way out: it's always easier to write **about** people rather than feel **with** them. Too often, he attempts to speak for African-Americans, and sometimes other races, as a whole – blending each individual experience into one. There is no such thing as 'The American Negro™'. All of his generalizations are ridiculous. Although I do not think that Baldwin meant any harm with it, I think that he wanted to give his words a 'scholastic bling', making them seem as if they sprung from an academic text book or social study. He wasn't yet aware of the worthiness of his personal experiences, thinking that no one would care for them.

Moreover, he often spoke from the perspective of white people, oddly, including himself in that group:

Up to today we are set at a division, so that he [the black man] may not marry our daughters or our sisters, nor may he – for the most part – eat at our tables or live in our houses.

This reinforces my notion that he might have had a white target audience in mind. Again, it didn't work for me and intensified the distance between myself and the text at hand.

The essays in which he describes **his own experiences and feelings** – the titular essay *Notes of a Native Son* and his account of his days spent in a French jail – are the strongest. In them Baldwin shines and shows what he's worth. It was gut-wrenching and emotional to learn about his difficult relationship with his religion-obsessed father, and the fact that he felt like he was going to suffocate in the US which is why he fled to Paris. In the titular essay, he details how his anger, once it exploded out of him in a café where a white waitress refused to serve him, eventually paved his road to nonviolence.

I could not get over two facts, both equally difficult for the imagination to grasp, and one was that I could have been murdered. But the other was that I had been ready to commit murder. I saw nothing very clearly but I did see this: that my life, my *real* life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart.

The collection would have been much better had Baldwin spoken more about himself – his experiences and his struggles and the lessons he learned from life. The book as it was published is way too overwrought and generalizes a problem which can't be generalized (by presuming one 'common' black experience) and thus failed to educate the reader or evoke empathy.

Nathan says

Most people are not naturally reflective any more than they are naturally malicious, and the white man prefers to keep the black man at a certain human remove because it is easier for him to thus preserve his simplicity and avoid being called to account for crimes committed by his forefathers, or his neighbors. He is inescapably aware, nevertheless, that he is in a better position in the world than black men are, nor can he quite put to death the suspicion that he is hated by black men therefore.

Go to Amazon, go to Goodreads, go to any site where people review writings on the diversity and depth of racism, and you will see people say the term "white hating" all the time. Try having an honest conversation about white privilege, and ten times out of ten, you'll get backlash from those who seem to believe that the white man is really the most persecuted minority in America. Take, for example, this recent Buzzfeed article. The article wasn't really in depth (it's Buzzfeed), but the whole point was that the publishing industry is still pretty skewed toward John Cheevers and John Updikes. It's an effort to make a statement, and to learn more about the different range of people in the world. Of course, since there was an anonymous comment section, it provoked such comments as:

"Completely and utterly racist, it would be racist for me to say that I'm not going to read a book by a black woman, yet it's okay for her to say something like this?"

"I don't see how this is diverse in any which way. You're excluding white males which means it's less diverse. The prerogative should be to read books from all authors regardless of race. Foolish."

"I cannot believe this is actually a thing. These people trying to fight for "equality" don't seem to understand that includes every race and sex. Here's a different idea: a book list full of good books and who give two fucks about who wrote them. Then again, that won't line up with Buzzfeed's feminist agenda."

I'm reminded of a Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie quote: "Race doesn't really exist for you because it has never been a barrier. Black folks don't have that choice."

Baldwin is fantastic, because he makes it easy to empathize. This book should be required reading for every single one of those false equivalent writing tools in that previous comment section. Particularly when he says "It was only that I had hated him and that I wanted to hold on to this hatred. I did not want to look on him as a ruin: it was not a ruin I had hated. I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain." I know this is a little cliché and tacky, but Baldwin helped me to realize many of the facets of systematic racism I have had the luxury of never addressing. Every time I open another of his books, I learn something, which is why he's swiftly becoming one of my favorites.

Elizabeth A says

"People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster."

I don't recall the last book I read that gave me such a mental workout. It took me a while to read this one as I had to stop and ponder what the man said, and much of my copy is highlighted. I would have loved to read this one in a classroom setting, so was delighted that my GR pal Elizabeth agreed to a buddy read.

"Joyce is right about history being a nightmare - but it may be the nightmare from which no one can CAN awaken. People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them."

I recently read *The Weight of Ink*, and this Baldwin quote kept playing in my head as I read it. We are the sum of our cumulative DNA, both physical, social, emotional. I've often thought about people being trapped by their history, but the idea of being trapped in history is an interesting one.

No review I write can do justice to this one, so I'd recommend picking up a copy and prepare yourself for a deep dive on race, religion, what it means to be human and other, societal/ cultural/ media critiques, and "the complex condition of being black in America." I learned much, pondered much, and was left with a different perspective on the issues of our time.

That Baldwin wrote this collection of essays in his early twenties is amazing. That much of what he wrote about is as pertinent today as it was in the late 1940s, early 1950s is sobering. Highly recommended, and should be required reading for everyone, especially Americans.

Joshua Rigsby says

The titular essay in this collection is phenomenal, one of the best I've ever read. It deals with race (as nearly everything from Baldwin does), but also the severely personal and complicated relationship that Baldwin has with both his father and his own identity. Everything is stirred into this smoking wok of anger and regret that is unlike anything I've ever read. It is amazing.

The rest of the pieces fail to reach the height of "Notes of a Native Son." Many of them are cultural criticism that is largely meaningless unless you are familiar with the book or movie Baldwin is citing. The diction in the earlier pieces strain for a kind of unnecessary erudition, almost as though Baldwin is trying to prove how eloquent he is. The latter pieces relax a little, and he is able to communicate confidently.

There is plenty to learn from here, in no small part due to Baldwin's honesty. Read it.

Sofia says

I was racking my brains trying to come up with the words that will show you who Baldwin is, what he writes. Then I said, "You're silly my girl, you can of course let him speak for himself".

What he has to say on seeing reality and working with it. How the present is a result of the past and how by denying the past, we deny the reality of us.

It began to seem that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition. The first idea was acceptance, the acceptance, totally without rancor, of life as it

is, and men as they are: in the light of this idea, it goes without saying that injustice is a commonplace. But this did not mean that one could be complacent, for the second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one's own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one's strength. This fight begins, however, in the heart and it now had been laid to my charge to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair.

“People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster”

“Or, to put it another way, my inheritance was particular, specifically limited and limiting: my birthright was vast, connecting me to all that lives, and to everyone, forever. But one cannot claim the birthright without accepting the inheritance. Therefore, when I began, seriously, to write—when I knew I was committed, that this would be my life—I had to try to describe that particular condition which was—is—the living proof of my inheritance. And, at the same time, with that very same description, I had to claim my birthright. I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am, also, much more than that. So are we all.”

His observations of humanity are spot on and humanity does not change that much that his observations become irrelevant. This is what he said on his 1984 preface about this book which was published back in 1949.

“It is not pleasant to be forced to recognize, more than thirty years later, that neither this dynamic nor this necessity have changed. There have been superficial changes, with results at best ambiguous and, at worst, disastrous. Morally, there has been no change at all and a moral change is the only real one. “Plus ça change,” groan the exasperated French (who should certainly know), “plus c'est le même chose.” (The more it changes, the more it remains the same.) At least they have the style to be truthful about it.”

And I will end with quoting Lessing a quote Baldwin chose to end his preface with:

“And,” says Doris Lessing, in her preface to African Stories, “while the cruelties of the white man toward the black man are among the heaviest counts in the indictment against humanity, colour prejudice is not our original fault, but only one aspect of the atrophy of the imagination that prevents us from seeing ourselves in every creature that breathes under the sun.”

Another stop in my Baldwin Journey with Maya.

Rowena says

“Any writer, I suppose, feels that the world into which he was born is nothing less than a conspiracy

against the cultivation of his talent.” - James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son

James Baldwin was a fascinating and eloquent man, one who I would have loved to have had a conversation with. His insights into racial issues are truly phenomenal.

This is a collection of short essays about Baldwin's experience with race. In the first three essays Baldwin critiques various books and movies on black culture that he believes do the race a disservice. In the 1950s when black representation was relatively low in both literature and film, I would assume that most black people would have been glad just to see themselves in print and on film; however, Baldwin talks about how misrepresentation is just as damaging as non-representation. I admire him a lot for that.

The other essays go into the black experience in the States and in Europe. One thing he said about his experiences in a small village in Switzerland was truly profound:

“I thought of white men arriving for the first time in an African village, strangers there, as I am a stranger here, and tried to imagine the astounded populace touching their hair and marveling at the color of their skin. But there is a great difference between being the first white man to be seen by Africans and being the first black man to be seen by whites. The white man takes the astonishment as tribute, for he arrives to conquer and to convert the natives, whose inferiority in relation to himself is not even to be questioned; whereas I, without a thought of conquest, find myself among a people whose culture controls me, has even, in a sense, created me, people who have cost me more in anguish and rage than they will ever know”

My favourite essay in this book was probably the titular one, Notes of a Native Son. It was heartbreakingly touching. I've read "Go Tell it on the Mountain" and I detested Baldwin's father. However, after reading this essay, my perception has changed a little. I still found the father unlikeable but now I'm appreciating how difficult it must have been for a black man, an authoritative one trying to raise his family in a society in which all his hard work accounts for next to nothing, a society in which he is the king at home and is considered a "boy" in the white world. I could tell that Baldwin was trying to understand and forgive his father, and let go of his anger; it was truly touching:

“... I did not want to see him because I hated him. But this was not true. It was only that I had hated him and I wanted to hold on to this hatred... one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain.”

Very powerful essays.

Brian says

Around this time last year friend Rowena and I did a buddy-read of this collection of Baldwin essays. It wasn't the first Baldwin book that I'd read, but it was the first book of his non-fiction. It was also the first book that I've read that made me feel SHAME for being a white man. The full weight of my race's mistreatment of African Americans became personal in the light of Baldwin's writing. It doesn't matter that I was born six years after the Civil Rights Act, that I never owned slaves or participated in Jim Crow – there is plenty for which I'm responsible in that inheritance of malfeasance that is made manifest - many times

without me even being aware it is happening.

After we finished the tandem read Rowena asked me here on GR if I planned on writing a review. The story is that I did write a review (a couple of drafts, in truth) but after reading what I wrote everything just sounded to my ears like the tinny braying of a white man's take on something he could never understand. So I ended up shredding those thoughts and posted nothing. Now, after a year reflection on the texts – and a background of tense race relations in the USA, I decided to pick this volume up again and give it another read. Baldwin's words are iodine-in-wound necessary to those of us "privileged" to be born white, male, American and affluent. I didn't get to choose the circumstances of my birth, just like Baldwin didn't. So just what is my responsibility to that inheritance that feels like a lodestone? Here's what Baldwin says in his preface to the 30th anniversary edition to this work:

My inheritance was particular, specifically limited and limiting: my birthright was vast, connecting me to all that lives, and to everyone, forever. But one cannot claim the birthright without accepting the inheritance.

Therefore, when I began seriously to write – when I knew that I was committed, that this would be my life – I had to try to describe that particular condition which was – is – the living proof of my inheritance. And at the same time, with that very same description, I had to claim my birthright. **I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am, also, much more than that. So are we all.**

That is beautiful – a sentiment written in 1984, three years before Baldwin's death. I wonder what Baldwin would have to say, had he lived to be 90 and published a new preface in 2014 commemorating the 60th anniversary of this work - his country lead by an African American President (elected twice, no less) but also suffering through the shit-shows of Michael Brown and Eric Garner? Absent this, I'm happy to have this rich volume of essays that remind me many times the best thing is to just listen.

Michael says

Powerful and precise as all of the essays are, Baldwin hits his stride with the titular piece, in which he embeds personal meditations on his father's death into a social analysis of the Harlem riot of 1943 and race relations in America. There's nothing else quite like it in the collection, though the essays about Paris in the third and final section are almost as brilliant.

Jesse says

Read with a group of friends in conjunction with a viewing of the Oscar-nominated documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*. Experiencing both film and essay collection in tandem, what kept coming to mind over and over was Jan Kott's influential phrase "Shakespeare, our contemporary," which forwards the idea that every generation discovers some aspect of the Bard that seems to speak specifically and almost peculiarly to them,

making him feel continuously contemporaneous. Well, I couldn't get the revised phrase "James Baldwin, our contemporary" out of my mind, as thirty years after his passing his work continues to thunder with the blistering, clear-throated immediacy as if being issued this very moment from twitter or a blog.

Certainly, some of the specific topics of analysis are specifically of its era, and the terminology is very much of its time as well. But Baldwin was an intersectional thinker—able to recognize how race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality, etc are all inextricably intertwined—long before the term became a term to toss about in internet think pieces, lending a suppleness to his ideas that allow them to be easily, often uncannily transposed to our current moment. The appearance of Raoul Peck's long-awaited documentary at the end of 2016 couldn't have occurred at a more apt moment: we need Baldwin more than ever.

I still generally prefer Baldwin the fiction writer to Baldwin the essayist, but just as a large source of the power of his novels lie in their autobiographical inflection, it is the pieces in this collection that are most autobiographical that were for me the strongest (my favorites being title essay, "Stranger in a Village," and "Journey to Atlanta"). Trying to think through larger social/political/cultural issues by offering up one's subjective experiences as a lens is nothing new in critical writing, and has become more or less ubiquitous now, but few have ever been able to do it as convincingly or with as much intricacy or nuance as Baldwin.

Was essential then, is essential now.

"One writes out of one thing only—one's own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art."

Nicole~ says

To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious, is to be in a rage almost all the time. So that the first problem is how to control that rage so that it won't destroy you.

- James Baldwin from "The Negro in American Culture", Cross Currents, XI (1961), p. 205

In his dramatic and provocative short piece *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) included in the ten essay volume of the same title, Baldwin connects a series of coincidental events, unifying them in a brilliantly conceived aesthetic design. Segmented in three parts, he reviews: an act of rage against a waitress in a restaurant; his father's death and his sister's birth; a race riot in Harlem, his father's burial and his 19th birthday.

I

In order really to hate white people one has to block so much out of the mind – and the heart – that this hatred becomes an exhaustive and self destructive pose.

Baldwin examined parallels between his younger, unenlightened self and his father's characteristic of garnering the enmity of many with his often unchecked fury. An experience of discrimination in a New Jersey restaurant ignited Baldwin's already building rage, leading him to throw a water pitcher at a waitress. Suddenly frightened by what he had done, he fled the scene, later speculating: *"I could not get over two facts, both equally difficult for the imagination to grasp, and one was that I could have been murdered. But the other was that I had been ready to commit murder. I saw nothing very clearly but I did see this: that my life,*

my real life was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart."

II

I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain.

July 29th, 1943 : The coincidence of his sister's birth, the same day as the death of his father - a man who was, to Baldwin, "*certainly the most bitter man I have ever met*," whom he considered was poisoned by the intense loathing, fear and cruelty he carried in him (diagnosed with mental-illness and later tuberculosis) - symbolically shaped in Baldwin's mind the death of an old toxic bitterness and the forming of an untainted, new beginning, to forgive and accept... "*life and death so close together, and love and hatred, and right and wrong....*" Ironically, his father's simple words echoed with posthumous meaning, that "*bitterness is folly*."

III

Harlem had needed something to smash. To smash something is the ghetto's chronic need.

August 3rd, 1943 : As if "*God himself had devised [it]*", the day that marked his 19th birthday, the day his father was returned to the earth, a race riot roiled in Harlem. Ghetto members vented their anger, fought one another, destroyed and looted in "*directionless, hopeless bitterness*", leaving smashed glass and rubble as 'spoils' of injustice, anarchy, discontent and hatred. These events deeply affected Baldwin who upon reflection sought a change from ill-will to good, to let go the demons and darkness that threatened to consume him - the hatred, bitterness, rage, violence, disillusionment, the social problems perpetuated by 'being Negro in America.'

It was necessary to hold on to the things that mattered. The dead man mattered, the new life mattered; blackness and whiteness did not matter; to believe that they did was to acquiesce in one's own destruction. Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was an immutable law.

As a writer, Baldwin depended greatly on his past experiences, grasping at every bittersweet drop. "*I think that the past is all that makes the present coherent, and further that the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly.*" Whether by coincidence or divine making, Baldwin's reflection on those fateful few days was spiritual, cleansing, revelatory, life-saving. From it germinated a new philosophy and idealism that lingered strongly and eternally, nourishing a poetic power and sustaining a literary genius for many years hence.

First read February 27th, 2014

J.L. Sutton says

Better known for works such as Go Tell It on the Mountain, James Baldwin's Notes of a Native Son (published 2 years later in 1955) is an important collection of essays which highlights issues Baldwin would

continue to address. Subjects of his essays include his own home life, life in Harlem, the inequities of separate but equal treatment of blacks in 1940s and 50s America as well as his own experiences in France after WWII. Baldwin's prose still resonates and is relevant today.

????? says

It's depressing that our treatment of migrant workers in the middle east is similar in many ways to how the whites treated black Americans. Khaleesi countries, in particular, are being built on the back of South Asians yet the Arabs treat them with nothing but condescension and contempt that often lead to abuse. True, they're paid for their labor and aren't literally slaves, but they're nevertheless considered inferior and Other, perhaps even inhuman and evil. And this treatment, this way we look at them, doesn't testify to their inferiority but to our inhumanity and fear. Fear of returning to the poverty they suffer and we once suffered from, and fear of needing one day to serve others and work as hard as they do. But most of all, fear of losing our identity, the identity that gives us power over them, the identity that entitles us to the riches under our feet. But we have to realize, before it's too late, that it's a fake and hateful identity that needs to be discarded and replaced by love and acceptance of ourselves and others as we and they really are: free and equal.

Barry Pierce says

This collection of essays is a rarity by the fact that every essay is as good as the previous one. There are no duds in this collection. This is by far one of the best collections I've ever read. Baldwin's prose is just so astoundingly beautiful. I may be premature in saying this but I feel that this may be Baldwin's greatest work. A collection so important, so accessible, so unforgettable that not reading this would be an injustice to you and your bookshelf.

Brierly says

Society, it would seem, is a flimsy structure, beneath contempt, designed by and for all the other people, and experience is nothing more than sensation—so many sensations, added up like arithmetic, give one the rich, full life.

I already know that I love James Baldwin's fiction (Giovanni's Room and If Beale Street Could Talk) so I am not surprised to feel similar about this collection of essays. But, this being a collection, of course there was an uneven appreciation as compared to a complete, cohesive work.

Notes of a Native Son are essays from the beginning of Baldwin's career; he divides the text into three main groupings: literary criticism, blackness, and identity. These are rough groupings, I know, but it helps you realize how different "Everybody's Protest Novel," which is an A+ lit crit essay on Uncle Tom's Cabin from "Notes of a Native Son," the title essay on his father. Each section contains several essays; the titular essay "Notes of a Native Son" is likely the strongest in the pack. Yet, as always, Baldwin's craftsmanship as evident in his sentence structure astounds me. I have never read anyone like Baldwin before.

And as the introduction aptly puts it, *the fiction offered a person of enormous humanity. The essays offered a man, a neighbor, or, yes, an older brother.* You need to read some nonfiction to have the full perspective

towards Baldwin's novels.

Ken Moten says

"When I was told, 'it takes time,' when I was young I was being told it will take some time before a Black person can be treated as a human being here, but it will happen. We will help to make it happen. we promise you.

Sixty years of one man's life is a long time to deliver on a promise, especially considering all the lives preceding and surrounding my own.

What has happened, in the time of my time, is the record of my ancestors. No promise was kept with them, no promise was kept with me, nor can I counsel those coming after , nor my global kinsmen, to believe a word uttered by my morally bankrupt and dishonest countrymen.

'And,' says Doris Lessing, in her preface to African Stories, 'while the cruelties of the white man toward the black man are among the heaviest counts of the indictment against humanity, colour prejudice is not our original fault, but only one aspect of the atrophy of the imagination that prevents us from seeing ourselves in every creature that breathes under the sun.' Amen. En avant." - Introduction to 1984 edition.

This is year two of the United Nations Decade for People of African Descent. Here is a report from the Working Group of Experts on the People of African Descent (hopefully you can access it):

<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/U...>

This one part examination one-part autobiographical confession of James Baldwin is amazing and I finished reading it right on time. It is an examination of his early career and it offers his take on everything from racism in Harlem, his views on Richard Wright and his novel Native Son, certain movies, the life and death of his father, and his early years in France and first encounters with Algerians. It is amazing to see how well large parts of his analysis holds up, and the European section is not only interesting in a somber way, but funny. I ought to have more to say, but I think, as the above section shows, Baldwin can say it better than me. So I recommend this as a good introduction to James Baldwin's non-fiction and will let Mr. Baldwin have the last word.

"The time has come to realize that the interracial drama acted out on the American continent has not only created a new black man, it has created a new white man, too. No road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where white men still have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger. I am not, really, a stranger any longer for any American alive. One of the things that distinguishes Americans from other people is that no other people has ever been so deeply involved in the lives of black men, and vice versa. This fact faced, with all its implications, it can be seen that the history of the American Negro problem is not merely shameful, it is also something of an achievement. For even when the worst has been said, it must also be added that the perpetual challenge posed by this problem was always, somehow, perpetually met. It is precisely this black-white experience which may prove of indispensable value to us in the world we face today. This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again." - Stranger in the Village.
