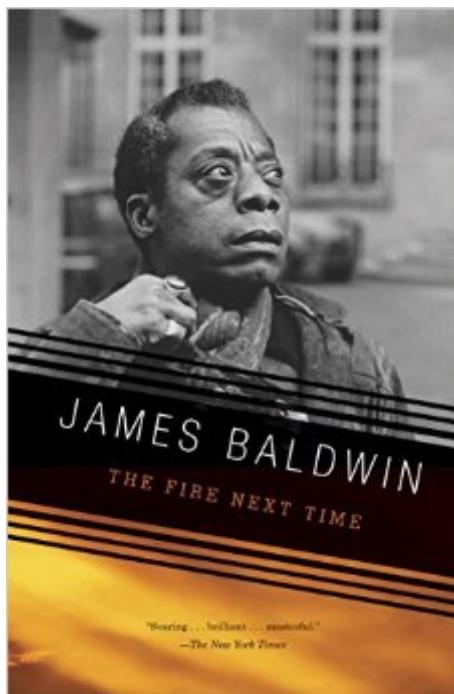


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The Fire Next Time (Vintage International)



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.

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..."

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.

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