

## “Perception at the Pitch of Passion”

By [Timothy Ledwith](#)

### [The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings](#)

By James Baldwin, edited by Randall Kenan  
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On a chilly night in 1985, about two years before he died, James Baldwin appeared at the Ethical Culture Society in New York. He was reading from *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, his book on the Atlanta child murders, one of the last works he would produce in a 40-year run as an author and American secular prophet. It was the only time I ever saw him speak. The Atlanta book was a relatively minor work, as even most of Baldwin's admirers would agree. But he was an imposing presence that evening, by turns wise, impatient, articulate, and weary. From where I sat, his wide eyes looked a little rheumy, yet he was still absorbing the world around him, seeing what others could not or, as he so often asserted, would not see. Then he took questions from the audience. I was too mesmerized to raise my hand.

Baldwin's writing had already affected me deeply as a clarion call from across the racial divide. The meandering yet purposeful sentences of this self-described “son of the Preacher man” from Harlem moved me in ways I didn't yet fully understand. This much I knew: my ancestors had arrived from Ireland as despised and exploited refugees on famine ships, and within decades they were running the city. Baldwin's people had arrived on slave ships, and centuries later they were still despised.

The distortions of history that allowed such an injustice to persist are at the heart of *The Cross of Redemption*, the new volume of Baldwin's previously uncollected writings.

Essays and speeches comprise the bulk of this collection, which also contains letters, profiles, forewords and afterwords, book reviews, and a short story. The mix is edited unevenly, with some jarringly random samples of marginal work and a few selections that seem like little more than filler. Posterity would not have been cheated, for example, by omitting the garbled transcript from a 1984 Q&A session at Amherst, in which the guest of honor seems to have a hell of a time hearing students' questions. Still, the better pieces are quintessential Baldwin. The best of them are essays dating from the era of civil rights protest that began in the 1950s and boiled over in the '60s. They sound familiar, urgent themes from his signature anthologies of those years, including *Notes of a Native Son* and *The Fire Next Time*. What's striking is how urgent these themes remain. Revisited, they suggest that the “post-racial” society promised by the election of our first black president was just the latest in a long line of delusions that serve to obscure unspeakable truths.

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Baldwin was obsessed with what he considered the central lie of American democracy: its denial of “the auction block” in the putative land of the free. “We have constructed a history which is a total lie, and have persuaded ourselves that it is true,” he writes in “Black Power,” a cautionary missive, from 1968, about the rage fostered by entrenched racial inequities. In “The Price May Be Too High,” published the following year, he points to the price that black artists pay for success in a system based on “the lie of white supremacy.” Too often, he argues, they become complicit in that deception:

What is being attempted is a way of involving, or incorporating, the black face into the national fantasy in such a way that the fantasy will be left unchanged and the social structure left untouched.

Despite such misgivings about being co-opted by mainstream white society, Baldwin was essentially integrationist; as an artist, a gay man, and a nuanced thinker, he was always too much of an outsider to embrace narrow nationalism. Yet he saw the politics of integration as a kind of band-aid applied to the open wound of slavery, a trope designed to avoid accountability and, above all, honesty.

Baldwin's essays tend to demonstrate this viewpoint through the prism of popular culture. In “Mass Culture and the Creative Artist: Some Personal Notes,” from 1959, he critiques *The Defiant Ones*, a 1958 film about an interracial pair of escaped chain-gang prisoners played by Sidney Poitier and Tony Curtis. Baldwin ridicules the movie's “suggestion that Negroes and whites can learn to love each other if they are only chained together long enough.” In his 1961 essay, “Theater: The Negro In and Out,” he deconstructs *Black Monday*, a play about a

racist killing in the Deep South – concluding that it obscures “the crimes of the Republic” by foregrounding the flaws of individual white characters:

If we get rid of all these mad people, the play seems to be saying, “We’ll get together and everything will be all right.” The realities of economics, sex, politics and history are thus swept under the rug.

When it came to such ahistorical house-cleaning, Baldwin charged cynical politicians and their enablers in the media with proffering the broom. Southern segregationists incurred the worst of his frequently Biblical wrath, but white liberals were not spared. “I don’t trust people who think of themselves as liberals,” he testified before a House subcommittee in 1969. “What I am saying is that I don’t trust missionaries.”

Of course, as a writer and orator who started out in the pulpit of his father’s storefront congregation, Baldwin himself was a missionary of sorts. There’s no denying his single-minded focus on speaking truth to power. He writes that “everything depends” on facing the facts about America’s racial history and the damage it has done – including damage to whites, for whom “the price of the ticket” is nothing less than the loss of their own identity. “No one was white before he/she came to America,” Baldwin states in a late essay, “On Being White ... and Other Lies,” from 1984. As he sees it, European immigrants made a choice to replace their authentic cultural heritage with the bland but safe social construct of whiteness. And he condemns that choice as an act of moral cowardice.

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The concept of racial identity as a conscious choice had never occurred to me before I encountered it in Baldwin’s work. In hindsight, I think this insight accounts for the impact he made, all those years ago, on a young man from a conservative Irish-Catholic family in outer-borough New York City. I hadn’t read him until my early twenties. Actually, I hadn’t read much of anything until then, unlike Baldwin, who famously made his way through every book in the 135th Street Library in Harlem as a boy. But when I finally delved into his collected non-fiction – after a running start through *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and the other early novels – I felt distinctly that I was learning as much about my own history as I was about the myriad legacies of the slave trade.

My sense of revelation resulted, in part, from Baldwin’s diagnosis of race relations in the United States as a zero-sum game. In a speech from 1963, “We Can Change the Country,” he observes that the so-called “Negro problem” is a misnomer, because it implies that the problem is one-sided. (A later essay entitled “The White Problem” aims to rectify that error.) He advises whites who are thus deluded to re-examine their assumptions, noting that “I, for example, do not bring down property values when I move in. You bring them down when you move out.”

By framing the issues in this way, Baldwin exposes the seamlessness of America’s racial past, present, and future. He compels all of the parties involved, or at least any who will listen, to lift the veil from their collective truths. In my case, that meant studying more about the history of the New York Irish and their rise to whiteness, which left behind their former black neighbors in teeming slums like Five Points. Once I learned about that history, the hateful attitudes I had grown up with suddenly had a context that I could understand, if not endorse. As Baldwin writes in “The Uses of the Blues,” from 1964, the glaring fact of black humanity could not be avoided in the close quarters of a multiracial society. Instead, it had to be denied through over-the-top racial stereotyping and discrimination. But this, too, exacted a price:

For one thing, it created in Americans a kind of perpetual, hidden, festering and entirely unadmitted guilt. Guilt is a very peculiar emotion. As long as you are guilty about something, no matter what it is, you are not compelled to change it.

For Baldwin, then, African-Americans are in a daunting double bind in relation to their white brethren. First, they are a constant reminder of the unresolved evils of centuries of bondage; and second, they invite unwelcome remorse on the part of whites who stepped on them – or over them, at least – on the march to the middle class. “White people,” he writes in 1979, “do not wish to be reminded whence they came by the poverty which is, they hope, behind them.”

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For all his subtle and acute analysis of these issues, of course, Baldwin didn’t shy away from bold, even hyperbolic statements. In fact, his tendency to overstate and oversimplify may have been his greatest rhetorical weakness. In a 1963 discussion of legally enforced integration at the University of Mississippi, for instance, he finds it “spectacular” that federal troops were called in to protect the school’s first enrolled black students. “I can see that one would say that no other country would have done it,” he writes. “It’s escaped everybody’s notice that no other country would have had to.” This would have been shocking news indeed to Nelson Mandela and his co-defendants, who spent much of that same year and the next in a South African courtroom, facing life sentences for opposing apartheid.

Still, it's worth recalling that Baldwin, at the height of his powers, was constantly responding to dramatic events; he once told an interviewer that in the 1960s he was "writing between assassinations." And it's easy to see how sermonizing came easily to him. He wrote in the cadences of the church, and with its moral certainties. He was a singer of the sorrow songs that transform suffering into something rare and beautiful through the alchemy of the blues. His aim, he writes, quoting Henry James, is "perception at the pitch of passion," and he makes no claims to objectivity. In "This Far and No Further," a 1983 essay on resistance to corrupt authority, he states unequivocally: "It is the responsibility of the Artist perpetually to question the zealous State and the narcotized Society."

Contemporary America may be more narcotized than ever and more polarized than at any time since the civil rights struggle. If only I had the chance to ask James Baldwin a question today, it would be, simply: Where do we go from here? The surprisingly timely work collected in *The Cross of Redemption* reaches into the past for an answer. In the process, it takes its readers one step, at least, down the path toward our common deliverance.

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