Going to Meet the Man

An Interview With James Baldwin

by James A. Baggett

*James Baldwin died at his home in the south of France on December 1. Baldwin was the author of influential essays (*The Fire Next Time, Nobody Knows My Name, Notes of a Native Son*), groundbreaking novels with major gay characters or themes (*Giovanni's Room, Another Country*) and plays about the black experience in America (*The Amen Corner, Blues for Mister Charlie*). His career was emblematic of black/white relations in the United States. While he achieved his greatest fame and acceptance by the white literary establishment as a spokesperson for blacks in America, many of his own people subsequently denied that he spoke for them. Baldwin consequently seemed to call for a more militant agenda, at which point the white establishment turned on him. Nevertheless, he remained a celebrity on college campuses until his death, and was lauded once again upon the publication of* The Price of the Ticket, *a collection of all his essays, in 1985 (although he was almost always criticized for the gay content of his novels in the mainstream press). The irony is that, in his obituaries, Baldwin was acknowledged the significant place in literary history he was systematically denied for the past two decades—often by the same "critics." (Eulogists mention Baldwin's sexual relations with men only glancingly, if at all, and only in reference to his writing.)*

Although Baldwin does not address the issue of his sexuality in the following interview, his remarks about history and oppression are certainly applicable to the gay situation, and the interview in general provides an intimate glimpse of a great writer looking back on his career.)

In early 1985, the editor of an educational literary magazine (Scholastic Inc.'s *Literary Cavalcade*) challenged me to land an interview with writer James Baldwin. I was then working as an associate editor of a science magazine at the same publishing company (I am now the editor of *Splice*, "the sophisticated entertainment magazine for young people"). The editor wanted me to get Baldwin to discuss the "craft" of writing with an audience of young people. I had previously interviewed William Least Heat Moon for the magazine. I accepted the challenge.

As I started digging around, I found out that Baldwin had given a speech a few years earlier to the the gay organization Black and White Men Together (BWMT, whose New York chapter has seen been renamed Men of All Colors Together). I also found out that Baldwin seldom granted interviews (the last one I could track down had been published in the *Paris Review* a few years earlier), that he made his home in a small town in the south of France called St. Paul de Vence, and that he often taught as a visiting professor at Amherst College in Massachusetts.

A friend who was once active in BWMT gave me the name of the group's ex-president, who used to live somewhere on St. Mark's Place. After weeks of trying the number, eventually a man with a British accent answered the phone. He told me that the person I was looking for was now living in Los Angeles, and gave me another number. After trying that number for a week or so, someone finally answered the phone. He told me that he couldn't remember how BWMT had convinced Baldwin to speak. But he did remember that Baldwin's younger brother David was a bartender at a jazz bar on the Upper West Side, called Mikel's. I had read somewhere about this brother, who had traveled with Baldwin and Martin Luther King, Jr. to Alabama in the early 1960s to help register blacks to vote.

J. Phil Samuell

James Baldwin

On my next free evening, I headed up to the West 90s, located the mostly black establishment, and parked my conspicuously white self on a stool at the bar. (I had called first to make sure that David Baldwin was scheduled to work that night). I ordered a Rolling Rock and a glass of ice from the older black bartender, and waited to see if I could overhear someone mention his name before I launched into my earnest and well-rehearsed pitch. Someone did. When next he checked on the status of my beer, I asked him it he was David Baldwin. He stared into my eyes and nodded his head yes. I told him that I wanted to contact his brother. He shook his head from side to side, turned, and walked away.

I fucked up, I thought. I was too abrupt. I was too white.

After a few minutes, he returned. He placed both of his large hands on top of the bar between us and asked me what exactly I wanted with his brother. Nervously, I made my pitch. I showed him copies of the magazine. I mentioned the fact that this was a way for his brother to speak directly to an audience of literally millions of young people. He scribbled down an address on a bar napkin and shoved it toward me. I thanked him profusely, finished my beer, and left.

The next day, I posted a package—containing a convincing letter asking for an interview (either in person, over the phone, or in writing), samples of my writing, and copies of the magazine—to the address I was given. I waited for weeks for a response, then followed up with another letter.

Nothing. So I called David Baldwin at the bar and told him of my situation. This time he gave me his brother's home phone number. I called for at least a month; dialing the number became part of my daily routine at the office. I did it without ever expecting an answer at the other end. But late one night, James Baldwin did answer the phone. And I was so surprised, I was nearly speechless. In his deep, dignified voice he kindly told me that he would be glad to speak with me in September in Amherst, where he would be teaching a seminar the next semester. He also gave me an address and phone number where I could reach him at that time.

I called to confirm my appointment with Baldwin the week I was to rent a car and drive up to Amherst for the interview. He told me that he would be coming down to New York for a visit and, if I could wait a few days, we could do the interview here. He instructed me to call him at his brother's in two weeks.

Two weeks later, I called and he asked me to meet him at noon for lunch on October 22, at El Faro Restaurant in Greenwich Village.

He didn't show up until after two o'clock. After a couple of cocktails, he started to loosen up. Then, over a three-hour lunch of *paella* and a glass of red wine (followed by brandy)—with me scribbling frantically and hoping my tape recorder was working—this is the conversation that took place. (After all that, *Literary Cavalcade* was unable to use the piece.)

James A. Baggett: *When did you first realize that you were going to become a writer?*

James Baldwin: I think when I was about 17 years old, when I left home. I left home and the church [as a young man, Baldwin was a preacher in a local church in Harlem] at the same time. I'm not so sure I knew I was going to become a writer as I was that I was going to become something else [than a preacher].

Does the act of writing help you to discover unexplored aspects of yourself?

That's what it's about, in a sense, isn't it? I'm not so sure the word is "help," though. Because one is always afraid when one writes, which is part of the charm of trying to write at all. For me, anyway.

You have observed that "painters have often taught writers how to see." What do you mean by this?

That's not so easy to explain. I know it has happened to me, but it's hard to describe. The first time I became aware of this was a long time ago, when I was about, maybe, 15. I had a very good friend, a much older man than myself, a black painter. He was my guide in many ways. One afternoon, we were standing on a street corner waiting for the light to change. I noticed he was looking down into the gutter. Then, he told me to look. So I looked. All I saw was water, you know. Then he said, "Look again." So I looked again and I saw the oil on the water and the city reflected beneath the oil and the water. So I saw something that I had never seen before.

Did you read a lot as a child?

Oh, I read everything.

Do you remember the first book you ever read?

Uncle Tom's Cabin. I read it over and over again. I also read *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens and *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevski—my favorite authors.

Was there anything that you, as an artist, had to come to grips with in order to write?

Well, several things. But I think everybody has to come to grips with

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whatever it is that hurts him or her the most, what frightens him or her the most. If you don't do that, you can't write.

Was there a process you had to go through, or was it more a revelation?

I don't know how to describe it. It wasn't really a revelation. Obviously it hurt me. Everything hurt me when I was young. I think that when you are young is when you are hurt by everything for the very first time. So, there was a question of color—a very grave question, because it involved my future, my sense of reality, and who I was and who I took myself to be. Who I took myself to be as distinguished from what other people took me to be, or said I was. And then there was the question of love. Those two questions, color and sex, can be lethal.

You have said that "one writes out of one thing only—one's own experience." How do you draw upon your own experiences in order to write?

I'm not so sure that it's entirely conscious. Because when you are growing up you obliterate or you hide, smuggle away, many, many things that frighten or that hurt you. But they are still there, and in writing, in a sense, you are forced to go there—to go where you are afraid to go. Then you discover things which in many ways are quite surprising, and always a little frightening. In my own case, anyway.

You have been called a spokesperson for blacks in this country, and I know that you don't consider yourself a spokesperson a much as a witness to the black experience. Can you explain the difference between the two?

I consider myself to be witness for a certain sense of life, but that's very hard to describe. Obviously, again the question of color is very important. But it is not the most important thing. A great question is, "How do you become a human being?"

Your fiction seems to deal more with personal experiences from your own past whereas your nonfiction tends to focus more on social issues, social injustice. Is there a reason for this?

The subject was thrust upon me, so to speak. Social issues can't be the central action of fiction, of plays, or poems. I can't write about a Jew or Greek, I can only write about someone who happens to be Jewish or Greek or Turkish or black. But the most important thing about the character is not the label, you know. It's not the title, it's who the person is, and that's hard. In non-fiction, you have to deal with those categories as a society deals with them—or fails to deal with them. But in fiction you have another obligation, which is to somehow get within the skin of the person.

Is writing ever a catharsis for you? Does it help you work through pain, injustice, or anguish?

People say it is, but I don't quite understand that. It's a great relief when it's over.

As time goes on, do you find it easier or more difficult to write?

Much harder. It doesn't get easier. (laughs) Sorry.

Do you still relate to your characters as much as, perhaps, you once did?

For me that doesn't change. It's a great mystery to get inside the skin of a character. I'm working on a novel now, and I don't quite know. . . The novel is working on me. I have all these characters walking up and down my house. I don't know quite who they are yet. When a book or a play is over, it's as though you have spent time with some people who have gotten to be fond of you and you have gotten to be fond of them. And when it's over, they say, "Ciao, Baby!" And you never really get to see them again.

Do you want to say anything else about the novel you're currently working on?

I am working on a very long novel which I knew a great deal about a few years ago, but now that I'm working on it, I don't know much about it any more. I know something about the people, I know something about the journey. But at the moment, there seems to be about a handful of people who are walking up and down my house. Some of them have names and some of them don't. Some of them are shadowy and some of them are not. It's called *No Papers for Mohammed.* The title's become heavier with time.

How do you know when the story or essay you are working on is over?

You reach a point when you realize that you cannot do anything more with it and one of you must leave the house.

Which comes easier for you, writing fiction or non-fiction?

Not at all, not at all.

Does it bother you to hear what critics have said about your writing?

Not any more. At one time it did.

Do you think racial attitudes in America have changed much since you moved to France in 1948?

The great difficulty with that is that racial attitudes are a reflection of something else. I don't really think most people wish to be wicked or to hurt other people. Some people do, but I don't think that's generally true. Most people are very easily frightened. Everybody wants to be saved. And the truth is that nobody wants to be black in this country. That's an irreducible human fact. Nobody wants to be despised. And it's difficult to trace the implications of the goal of black people in this country, the role of black people in the American imagination. It would be interesting to turn the tables and say that it's not a black problem, but a white problem. It really is as though my former masters cannot forgive themselves for having put me in chains. There is nothing harder than to forgive someone that you know you've wronged.

It may be then that this history is also the present. I don't want myself or my children to become the equal of my slavemasters. It is perfectly possible that I don't want to be like you—do you see what I mean?—and that you don't want to be like you, either. And if you, too, would like to be liberated from this pall of history—the results of our present—it is in that kind of effort or labyrinth that most Americans get lost. Because it is not my fault that the color of my skin implies your history, whether or not you know it. It also implies your options. Sometimes you know it, sometimes you don't. It implies, above all, the most profound judgment of your standards. Maybe that is why I cannot be as assimilated as you, as some people would put it. Not only because you don't want me to be assimilated. Because you both cling to your guilt and run from it. And guilt is the most useless of the human emotions. You can't do anything with it except be paralyzed by it.

Do I make sense to you? When you think about the legends of black people in this country, you are confronted not with black people at all, but with what the white American imaginagion wishes to make of their ordeal. There is not a word of truth, for example, in *Gone With the Wind*, not a word of truth in it. It demeans both of us. And this is the key to American politics. Either you love this country or you perish in the illusion that you can repudiate it. And I love this country very much—it's the only reason I am here. Americans see black people with that very same simplemindedness that they see the world. It is ridiculous, it's absolutely insane, to imagine that a boy like me here—or in South Africa or in Nicaragua or in El Salvador or in Brazil—has even the remotest intention of becoming a communist. People one day ahead of death by starvation are not reading Marx. And every so-called "revolution" came from the middle class. Castro is not a peasant. Neither was Che

Guevara. But misery forces a response. Not for a moment was I either seduced or menaced by Moscow.

Many of your characters have been victims of some sort. In what ways have you been victimized, if at all, during your life?

It's not so easy to answer that. Give me a moment. I've been victimized by my color, my size, and my hypothetical potential. That is to say that I was born into a world where I was expected to carry a broom or mop forever. Or I could graduate to carrying an attaché case. I was a child born into a world that was trying to tell me who I was. And if you believe it, you become a victim. But it is very hard not to believe it. The world has many ways of making these definitions real.

How did you come to be acquainted with the writer Richard Wright [author of the novel Native Son*]?*

I wanted to meet him, and a girl I knew—this was 1944—had his address. She loaned me a dime to take the subway to Brooklyn to visit him. And I knocked on his door.

And said?

I don't know what I said. Probably, "I'm Jimmy Baldwin." He was very, very, very nice. Very nice indeed. I remember that evening. I didn't drink in those days, and I was starving. He was very polite and offered me a drink. He drank bourbon. I don't know how in the world I managed to sit on my chair throwing down the bourbon on an empty stomach and being 19 years old.

Are there any contemporary novelists that you read?

One embarrassing truth about being a novelist is that when you are working on a novel, you don't read. You don't read other novelists, anyway. But there's William Styron, there's Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, David Bradley, and Maya Angelou—she's beautiful. Gloria Naylor is something else!

Didn't you write a book with the poet Nikki Giovanni [A Dialogue]?

Uh huh. Nikki is beautiful, too. I haven't seen her in a long time.

Do you feel any responsibility to live up to your reputation as a successful writer?

You can't deal with that. You break the pencil when it's over and you try to do something else.

Do you ever write poetry?

Oh, yes. My first book of poetry was published in England and France and Holland, about two years ago.

Can you explain what you mean when you say that what is happening right now—the reality of the moment—is history? How is the present shaped by events in our past?

You can't get through a single day without operating on assumptions which are so profound as to be almost unconscious, and these assumptions are based on history. The way you really are is the way your ancestor taught you to see the world. So I respond this way or that way out of assumptions I scarcely know I hold. But my history has given me those assumptions.

Does that mean one will always react the same way, then?

Oh, no. I'm not talking about Pavlov's dog. But on any given night, part of the potential and terror and hope of that night is to confront the assumptions on which you operate. To confront, and perhaps change, the assumptions on which you operate. Life is always challenging your assumptions. One could say that Ronald Reagan is operating on the assumption that he doesn't know what holds. And though he has absolutely no sense of history, he is an historical creation. He thinks he's Teddy Roosevelt, for example, or Gary Cooper. Who knows? But he is, in a sense, an exquisite victim of history because it has never occurred to him to challenge any of the assumptions under which he thinks he lives.

Do you challenge these assumptions that we live under, in your writing?

I have to. That's what it's about, isn't it? That's what *Another Country* is about, really. That's the subtext, anyway. The character Rufus is controlled completely by his history, which forces him to go under. He's based on a friend of mine who jumped off that same bridge, in 1946. You can't unsee what you see.

In what ways have you changed as a writer since you were first published?

That was 40 years ago. I would like to think I've changed. Of course I've changed. But I'm not absolutely sure. . . .

Do you consider yourself an expatriate?

The world is round. You carry your home with you. I've been called an expatriate, but I've never thought of myself that way. I'm not romantic. I'm not like F. Scott Fitzgerald. But anyway, that was an extraordinarily grief-filled expatriation. It ended with a crash. At most it was for five years, and then they all came home. In my own case, it was a matter of life or death. It was very clear to me that if I stayed here another ten days, another five days, another hour, somebody was going to call me "nigger" once too often and one of us would die. That was very clear to me. I did not know what was going to happen to me in Paris, but I knew what was going to happen to me here. In Paris, I was left alone. I was on my ass, I was in trouble, I was starving. But poverty in Paris is not really what it means in America. It does not mean that you shit on yourself. It doesn't mean that you couldn't make it in the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave. You're in trouble, you're on your ass. Right. A whole lot of people are. If you can make it, so much the better. If you can't, so much the worse. But at least it's up to you. I don't want anybody hanging on the edge, you know, asking me about my mother and all this literal fucking bullshit. I just wanted to be left alone. Leave me alone, let me see if I can do it. If I can do it, okay. If I can't do it, too bad.

As a little boy, you used to tell your mother that you were going to be a great writer. How did you know this?

I was seven years old. Still, that's an interesting question, which I can't answer. But I can tell you about my mother. She's still alive; you can meet her. She's in Maryland now, where she comes from, where she was born. She's 85. She's a good woman, a strange woman. I will never understand her. The most important thing about my mother for me is that she let us go. She had to let me go first because I was the oldest. She was shaking in her boots, but she never tried to stop me. When I left home, I didn't say I was leaving home. I said I was going away for the weekend. But she knew I wasn't coming back. I needed 85 cents for the bus, and she gave me a dollar.

What advice do you have for young writers in America today?

Advice is something one should never give and no young writer worth his or her salt will take it. But I'll tell you what a friend told me a long time ago: Take what you have and make what you want.

What obligations are there for the black writer today?

Essentially, what a black writer is supposed to do—but nobody wants to face it—is to corroborate the American tradition of black people. It is still true in this country that a free nigger is a bad nigger.

Do you think that's going to change?

Before you are my age it will.

It has been said that there is a theme running through your recent writing that says our national problems stem from a retreat from self-knowledge. Is this a myth or reality?

Well, let's use Maggie Thatcher. She is the caretaker of an island, not an empire. When she led that invasion into the Falkland Islands, it was a stampede into

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Great Britain's past. And one of the things that's happened since is, when the soccer fans created that slaughter in Brussels. They were imitating their leader.

And this also applies to the individual?

I said this years and years ago: If I am not what you said I am not, then it is not my identity which is in question, but yours.

In your essay "The Creative Process," you say that the one face that one can never see is one's own face. Can you explain this thought?

It's true. My father always had a judgment of me as ugly. The moment came in my life when I had to realize for the first time that the world's judgment of me as a nigger was no longer the world's responsibility, but my own. And the fact that my father said I was ugly and the fact that the world said I was a nigger was not the liberty to act on those assumptions. So, without having the remotest idea of what I looked like, I was finally forced to say that I think those judgments are crazy. If you become beautiful, then you look beautiful to others.

Was there ever a teacher who had any particular influence on you?

Yes, there was. A white teacher, a woman named Miss Miller. I wrote about her in my book about the movies, *The Devil Finds Work*. It's not very well known; the Dial Press published it a few years ago. It's about black people in the American cinema. Anyway, Miss Miller was a very, very important lady to me. She took me to my first movies. She's still alive, in California. A beautiful lady. She was a liberation to me, because she was white, I was young. But she wasn't "white." She was like I was. She took me to see *Macbeth*. We marched in the May Day parade together. She took me to my first play, when I was nine. We called her Bill Miller, but her name was Orilla Miller.

Is one born an artist, or does one learn to become an artist?

I think *artisan* is a better term. I want to build a table, I want people to eat on it for a thousand years. It is possible that you know that, but you cannot be taught it.

What about your writing habits?

I write at night, because when I was young I had to. I worked during the day and wrote at night. I write in longhand, on a yellow legal pad. I'm perfectly willing to use a word processor; if I manage to master it is another question. It might save time, and it might not. I profoundly distrust a machine which can only feed back to me what I fed into it. It seems to me that that has nothing whatever to do with writing. But writers are like sewer rats; they will always find a way to do it. An artist will always find a way to be an artist—there's no way around that. So I'm not worried about it. I write in longhand in order to control the word, the page, and the pace. When you write in longhand, you use a simple word and a shorter sentence. It's my way of controlling what I'm doing.

Is a good fiction writer capable of writing strong essays?

Yes. But it's rare, isn't it? It requires a different kind of concentration. An essay is essentially an argument. You are trying to convince the reader of something. But a novel, a play, a poem—it's another question altogether. With fiction, you are trying to seduce the reader, trying to attract the reader's attention in quite another way.

What do you think young people today should be trying to get out of their education?

The difficulty with education is that this country doesn't have any respect for education. Education is not a matter of being a huge success. It is not pragmatic. It's a matter of learning about the world in which you live. ■