

price of being alive. James Baldwin, a man of great perception, passion and humor, a man who sought connection, all too often found himself looking across the drawn battle lines of borders. He didn't shun them; the battle lines were, as he might put it, the price of the ticket.

James Baldwin: *The Price of the Ticket* plays Thursday through Sunday, Feb. 3-6, at 7 pm; with additional shows on Friday, Feb. 4, at 9 pm and on Sunday, Feb. 6, at 5 pm. Prices vary. Clinton Street Theatre, 2522 SE Clinton St., 238-8899.

BALDWIN IN PRINT

In his introduction to *Nobody Knows My Name*, James Baldwin writes:

"In America, the color of my skin had stood between myself and me; in Europe, that barrier was down. Nothing is more desirable than to be released from an affliction, but nothing is more frightening than to be divested of a crutch. It turned out that the question of who I was was not solved because I had removed myself from the social forces which menaced me—anyway, these forces had become interior, and I had dragged them across the ocean with me. The question of who I was had at last become a personal question, and the answer was to be found in me."

Baldwin never stopped with simple answers. His writing and speeches reflected the complexity of his life, as he sought to make sense of the black/white polarity in the United States. In *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985*, Baldwin wrote:

"It is exceedingly difficult for most of us to discard the assumptions of the society in which we were born, in which we live, to which we owe our identities; very difficult to defeat the trap of circumstance, which is, also, the web of safety; virtually impossible, if not completely impossible, to envision the future, except in those terms which we think we already know. Most of us are about as eager to be changed as we were to be born, and go through our changes in a similar state of shock."

"Including this writer, of course, who was far, however, years ago, from being able to forgive himself for being so irretrievably human. The power of the social definition is that it becomes, fatally, one's own—but it took time, and much deep water, to make me see this. Rage and misery can be a source of comfort, simply because one has lived with rage and misery for so long."

Although his childhood was distorted by terror of his father and a perennially pregnant mother, whom the children conspired to protect from the father, Baldwin delighted in each new baby that came along. In *The Price of the Ticket, Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985*, Baldwin wrote:

"I want to avoid generalities as far as possible; it will, I hope, become clear presently that what I am now attempting dictates this avoidance; and so I will not say that children love miracles, but I will say that I think we did. A newborn baby is an extraordinary event; and I have never seen two babies who looked or even sounded remotely alike. Here it is, this breathing miracle who could not live

an instant without you, with a skull more fragile than an egg, a miracle of eyes, legs, toenails, and (especially) lungs. It gropes in the light like a blind thing—it is, for the moment, blind—what can it make of what it sees? It's got a little hair, which it's going to lose, it's got no teeth, it pees all over you, it belches, and when it's frightened or hungry, quite without knowing what a miracle it's accomplishing, it exercises its lungs. You watch it discover it has a hand; then it discovers it has toes. Presently, it discovers it has you, and since it has already decided it wants to live, it gives you a toothless smile when you come near it, gurgles or giggles when you pick it up, holds you tight by the thumb or the eyeball or the hair, and, having already opted against solitude, howls when you put it down. You begin the extraordinary journey of beginning to know and to control this creature. You know the sound—the meaning—of one cry from another; without knowing that you know it. You know when it's hungry—that's one sound. You know when it's wet—that's another sound. You know when it's angry. You know when it's bored. You know when it's frightened. You know when it's suffering. You come or you go or you sit still according to the sound the baby makes. And you watch over it where I was born, even in your sleep, because rats love the odor of newborn babies and are much, much bigger."

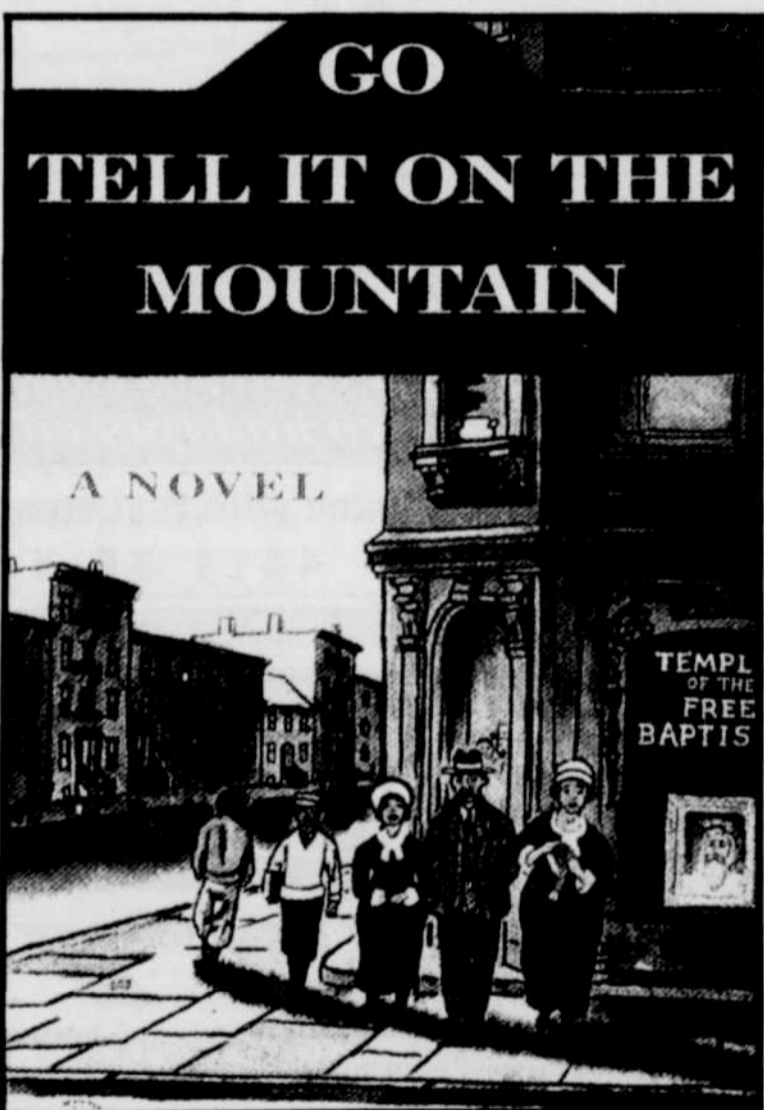
Baldwin didn't jump onto the easy name-calling bandwagons of some of his contemporaries, causing many to call him weak. The issue of race revealed a wealth of information, and towards the end, a glimmer of joy, as he writes in *The Price of the Ticket, Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985*:

"The will of the people, or the State, is revealed by the State's institutions. There was not, then, nor is there, now, a single American institution which is not a racist institution. And racist institutions—the unions, for one example, the Church, for another, and the Army—or the military—for yet another, are meant to keep the nigger in his place. Yes: we have lived through avalanches of tokens and concessions but white

power remains white. And what it appears to surrender with one hand it obsessively clutches in the other.

"I know that this is considered to be heresy. Spare me, for Christ's and His Father's sake, any further examples of American white progress. When one examines the use of this word in this most particular context, it translates as meaning that those people who have opted for being white congratulate themselves on their generous ability to return to the slave that freedom which they never had any right to endanger, much less take away. For this dubious effort, and still more dubious achievement, they congratulate themselves and expect to be congratulated: in the coin, furthermore, of black gratitude, gratitude not only that my burden is (slowly, but it takes time) being made lighter but my joy that white people are improving."

The collected fiction and nonfiction of James Baldwin is, well, worth revisiting for the strength, clarity and hope that he offers.



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