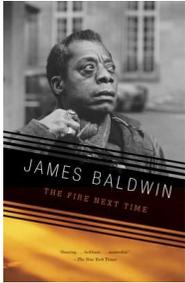


# Books by the Stack



## **The Fire Next Time by James Baldwin**

A plea and a warning to citizens to examine the actual state of America after a century of emancipation.

**Why you'll like it:** *Issue-oriented, impassioned, compelling, lyrical.*

**About the Author:** James Baldwin was born on August 2, 1924, in New York. Baldwin's father was a pastor who subjected his children to poverty, abuse, and religious fanaticism. As a result, many of Baldwin's recurring themes, such as alienation and rejection, are attributable to his upbringing. Baldwin published *Go Tell It on the Mountain* in 1953. A largely autobiographical work, it tells of the religious awakening of a fourteen-year-old. Baldwin holds a distinguished place in American history as one of the foremost writers of both black and gay literature. He was an active participant in the Civil Rights movement. Baldwin succumbed to cancer on December 1, 1987. (Bowker Author Biography)

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. What is the significance of the book's title, the titles of its two sections, and the epigraphs that precede the book itself and the second letter?
2. What was the young James Baldwin running from and what was he seeking in his turn to religion as a fourteen-year-old boy in Harlem?
3. What are the reasons for and circumstances of the seventeen-year-old Baldwin's renunciation of his religious calling and of Christianity itself?
4. How does Baldwin personalize history and the issue of black oppression in the United States? Does this personalizing result in too narrow a focus or does it intensify his account's impact and our response?
5. What is Baldwin's attitude toward the Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammad? How does that attitude relate to his previously expressed observations on race relations and racial discrimination?
6. In what contexts does Baldwin discuss violence/ What do those contexts, together with specific passages reveal about his attitude toward violence as a historical occurrence and as a literary effect?
7. Baldwin makes repeated reference to America's – particularly white America's – avoidance (through fear or ignorance) of self-examination, its "failure to look reality in the face." What, in Baldwin's view, are the implications of this failure? Do you agree with him?
8. Early on in essay two (p.20), Baldwin discusses the option for escape from poverty that people in Harlem had. In the following several pages, Baldwin challenges the idea – that working hard leads to success. Later in the same essay (p. 89), Baldwin makes further challenges to the American Dream. Consider your

definition of the American Dream and compare it to his definition. Is it possible to achieve?

**9.** In “My Dungeon Shook,” Baldwin paints a picture of his relationships with his father and brother. How do these men act as Baldwin’s role models for African-American manhood? How do you think these men, as well as Baldwin, formed young James’ view of himself as a man?

**10.** The first essay is to Baldwin’s 14-year-old nephew. The second essay begins when Baldwin is 14. Why is that age so important in terms of growing up? What ideas, concerns, and decisions happen around that age?

*(Questions provided by publisher and Augustana College)*



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