

□ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

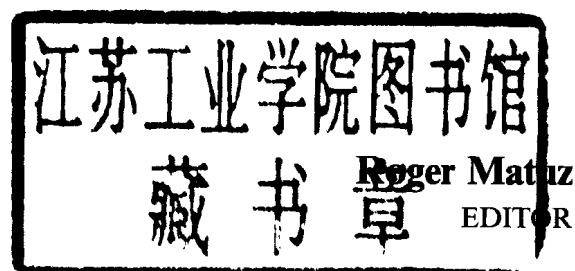
CLC

67

Volume 67

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the
Works of Today's Novelists, Poets,
Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters,
and Other Creative Writers



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC presents significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered by *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

The present volume of *CLC* includes Kate Millett, widely acknowledged as a pioneering figure of the contemporary feminist movement; Derek Walcott, an acclaimed West Indian poet whose 1990 epic poem *Omeros* reinvents Homer’s *Odyssey* to explore the Caribbean people’s influence on world culture; Oliver Sacks, English neurologist and author of the best-selling *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* and *Awakenings*, the latter of which was adapted into an award-winning film; and John Guare, whose Tony-nominated play *Six Degrees of Separation* achieved great popularity on Broadway.

Perhaps most importantly, works that frequently appear on the syllabuses of high school and college literature courses are represented by individual entries in *CLC*. James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson* are examples of works of this stature appearing in *CLC*, Volume 67.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign writers, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups within the United States.

Format of the Book

Each *CLC* volume contains about 500 individual excerpts—with approximately seventeen excerpts per author—taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material in *CLC* provide them with vital information needed to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Features

A *CLC* author entry consists of the following elements:

- The **author heading** cites the form under which the author has most commonly published, followed by birth date, and death date when applicable. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by a question mark.
- A **portrait** of the author is included when available.
- A brief **biographical and critical introduction** to the author and his or her work precedes the excerpted criticism. The first line of the introduction provides the author’s full name, pseudonyms (if applicable), nationality, and a listing of genres in which the author has written. Since *CLC* is not intended to be

a definitive biographical source, cross-references have been included to direct readers to these useful sources published by Gale Research: *Short Story Criticism* and *Children's Literature Review*, which provide excerpts of criticism on the works of short story writers and authors of books for young people, respectively; *Contemporary Authors*, which includes detailed biographical and bibliographical sketches of more than 98,000 authors; *Something about the Author*, which contains heavily illustrated biographical sketches of writers and illustrators who create books for children and young adults; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, which provides original evaluations and detailed biographies of authors important to literary history; and *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* and *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*, which offer autobiographical essays by prominent writers for adults and those of interest to young readers, respectively. Previous volumes of *CLC* in which the author has been featured are also listed in the introduction.

- A list of **principal works**, arranged chronologically and, if applicable, divided into genre categories, notes the most important works by the author.

- The **excerpted criticism** represents various kinds of critical writing, ranging in form from the brief review to the scholarly exegesis. Essays are selected by the editors to reflect the spectrum of opinion about a specific work or about an author's literary career in general. The excerpts are presented chronologically, adding a useful perspective to the entry. All titles by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type, which enables the reader to easily identify the works being discussed. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and parenthetical numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of a work) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.

- A complete **bibliographical citation** designed to help the user find the original essay or book follows each excerpt.

- A concise **further reading** section appears at the end of entries on authors for whom a significant amount of criticism exists in addition to the pieces reprinted in *CLC*. In some cases, this annotated bibliography includes references to material for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights.

Other Features

- An **Acknowledgments** section lists the copyright holders who have granted permission to reprint material in this volume of *CLC*. It does not, however, list every book or periodical reprinted or consulted during the preparation of the volume.

- A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all the authors who have appeared in the various literary criticism series published by Gale Research, with cross-references to Gale's biographical and autobiographical series. A full listing of the series referenced there appears on the first page of the indexes of this volume. Readers will welcome this cumulated author index as a useful tool for locating an author within the various series. The index, which lists birth and death dates when available, will be particularly valuable for those authors who are identified with a certain period but whose death date causes them to be placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, Ernest Hemingway is found in *CLC*, yet a writer often associated with him, F. Scott Fitzgerald, is found in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*.

- A **Cumulative Nationality Index** alphabetically lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by numbers corresponding to the volumes in which they appear.

- A **Title Index** alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the current volume of *CLC*. Listings are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, novellas, dramas, films, record albums, and poetry, short story, and essay collections are printed in italics, while all individual poems, short stories, essays, and songs are printed in roman type within quotation marks; when published separately (e.g., T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*), the title will also be printed in italics.

- In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale has also produced a **special paperbound edition** of the *CLC* title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers and will be published with the first volume of *CLC* issued in each calendar year. Additional copies of the index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index: it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is disposable upon receipt of the following year's cumulation.

A Note to the Reader

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in the Literary Criticism Series may use the following general forms to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

¹Anne Tyler, "Manic Monologue," *The New Republic* 200 (April 17, 1989), 44-6; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 58, ed. Roger Matuz (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990), p. 325.

²Patrick Reilly, *The Literature of Guilt: From 'Gulliver' to Golding* (University of Iowa Press, 1988); excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 58, ed. Roger Matuz (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990), pp. 206-12.

Suggestions Are Welcome

The editors welcome the comments and suggestions of readers to expand the coverage and enhance the usefulness of the series.

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James Baldwin

1924-1987

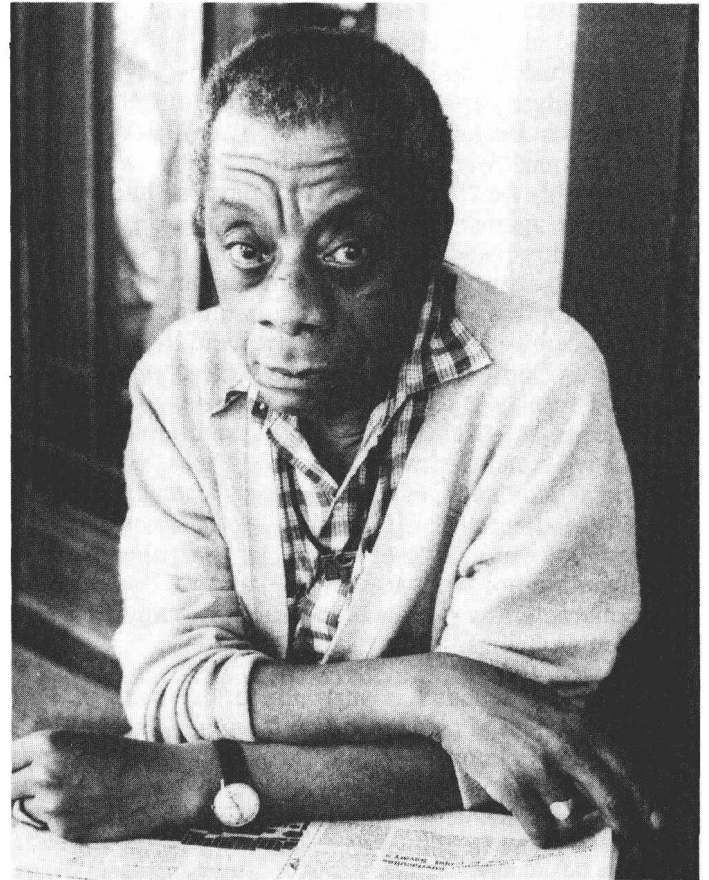
(Full name: James Arthur Baldwin) American novelist, essayist, playwright, scriptwriter, short story writer, and author of children's books.

The following entry presents criticism on Baldwin's novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953). For further information and commentary on his career, see *CLC*, Vols. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 13, 15, 17, 42, 50.

Baldwin is considered among the most prestigious writers in post-World War II American literature. Beginning with the publication of his first and most highly respected novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, he garnered praise for exposing the racial and sexual polarization of American society and for challenging readers to confront these differences. Critics have reserved their highest acclaim for his essays, yet Baldwin's novels, plays, and short stories have also consistently generated commentary, and most reviewers concur with the opinion of Robert Bone: "The best of Baldwin's novels is *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and his best is very good indeed. It ranks with Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a major contribution to American fiction."

Like the protagonist of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin was born into poverty in Harlem, a predominantly black district of New York City, and was raised in a strict religious household headed by his stepfather, an often abusive storefront preacher who had migrated from New Orleans. After experiencing an extreme religious crisis at fourteen years of age, Baldwin entered a ministry and began to preach at the Fireside Pentecostal Church in Harlem, where his sermons emphasized the vision of the apocalypse described in the Book of Revelation. Baldwin attended De Witt Clinton High School and served on the staff of the school's literary magazine, *The Magpie*. He graduated in 1942 and renounced the ministry to become a writer. After a brief stint working in defense factories in New Jersey and following the death of his stepfather, Baldwin returned to Harlem in 1943. Over the next five years, he held a succession of menial jobs and began publishing book reviews in such periodicals as the *Nation* and the *New Leader*. Shortly after the publication of his first essay, "The Harlem Ghetto," in 1948, Baldwin moved to Paris, where he suffered a mental breakdown. While recovering, however, he recognized his frustrations with racial prejudice and completed what was to become his first published novel.

Go Tell It on the Mountain dramatizes events leading up to the religious confirmation of John Grimes, a sensitive youth trying to come to terms with his confusion over his sexuality and his religious upbringing. Central to the novel is John's relationship with his stepfather, Gabriel Grimes, a fundamentalist preacher whose overweening pride and insecurities concerning his own religious commitment re-



sult in his abusive treatment of John and the emotional neglect of his family. Many reviewers have interpreted *Go Tell It on the Mountain* as an exercise in confessional autobiography. Michel Fabre, who saw the primary theme as the conflict between fathers and sons, called *Go Tell It on the Mountain* "a barely fictionalized account of James Baldwin's own life," and David Littlejohn concurred by characterizing the book as "the testament of [Baldwin's] coming to terms with, his defining and transcending, the experience of his boyhood—his family, his religion, his Harlem youth." Although most commentators agree that the book's ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations, the view of Baldwin's novel as autobiography was supported by Baldwin himself: "*Mountain* is the book I had to write if I was ever going to write anything else. I had to deal with what hurt me most. I had to deal, above all, with my father. He was my model. I learned a lot from him. Nobody's ever frightened me since."

Following the publication of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin was commonly linked to the tradition of black protest fiction exemplified by the works of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. Baldwin had met Wright, author of *Native Son*, while working on a novel that he later aban-

done. Although he briefly embraced Wright as his mentor, Baldwin felt he had to break with the older writer in order to complete *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. In his influential essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin asserted that writers like Wright who overtly espouse social causes such as racial justice are essentially sincere propagandists. According to Stanley Macebuh, Baldwin later stated that he was "not about to become another Richard Wright, and his early efforts at writing had proved unsuccessful because he had listened to too many advisers who expected only a certain kind of writing from black writers." Baldwin declared in *Nobody Knows My Name* that he and Wright "were about as unlike as any two writers could possibly be." While Wright's purpose had been to express rage against racial oppression, Baldwin sought to create a highly personal literature dealing less with racial conflict than with the complexity of human motivations: "Only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves." While some commentators, such as Therman B. O'Daniel, have continued to categorize Baldwin as a protest writer in the tradition of Wright, others have concurred with Granville Hicks, who judged Baldwin's avoidance of polemicism successful because "there is no danger that [*Go Tell It on the Mountain*] will be pigeonholed as a novel of protest, [as] it neither expresses indignation nor seeks to arouse it, and we do not think of the characters as victims of injustice or as anything else than human beings."

Much critical debate has surrounded the issue of Baldwin's treatment of race in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Although some acknowledge that the novel subtly portrays the white world as a remote and abstract force that is somehow responsible for the dehumanizing conditions of the Harlem ghetto, most commentators agree that the issue of racial conflict is generally deemphasized. Baldwin stated that the book represents "a fairly deliberate attempt to break out of what I always think of as the 'cage' of Negro writing. I wanted my people to be people first, Negroes almost incidentally." Some initial reviewers, such as T. E. Cassidy, felt that Baldwin had failed to achieve his goal "because there is always the absolute feeling of injustice toward a people, not as people, but as a race of people." Most early reviewers, however, found the issue of race to be of secondary importance. Houston A. Baker, Jr. supported this conclusion by remarking that *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is "far more than the chronicle of the experiences of a single black boy in a Harlem environment. The novel is a *Bildungsroman* (a novel recording the development of a young man) of universal appeal, and it speaks eloquently of the terrors and hopes of youth as a whole, while at the same time it portrays the very special terror of being young and black in America."

Later commentators who have faulted Baldwin's attempt to transcend racial issues have frequently based their arguments on the author's later essays, which often describe the poverty of his early life in Harlem. Norman Podhoretz, for instance, declared that the reader senses that "Baldwin is trying to persuade you that there is no real difference between the situation of [John] Grimes and that of any other sensitive American boy who is at odds with

his environment. But there is a difference, and it is not merely one of degree—as any reader of *Notes of a Native Son* can tell you." Colin MacInnes felt that Baldwin failed to transcend the racial issue in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* because the "misery and drama" of the novel "are, by implication, a consequence of the Negro situation in the United States." Robert Bone stated that "Baldwin sees the Negro quite literally as the bastard child of American civilization" and asserted that the author had implied racial conflict in his depiction of religious and family strife. Bone further contended that Baldwin's portrayal of John as the innocent victim of his father's incoherent rage "approaches the very essence of Negro experience. That essence is rejection, and its most destructive consequence is shame."

Some critics believe that the primary significance of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* lies less in its treatment of race than of religion. Shirley S. Allen, for example, demonstrated "that John is struggling against forces more universal than white persecution of blacks in America," and MacInnes contended that the novel presents "a story saturated with religious feeling" and "would simply not exist at all without it." Most critical controversy surrounding the religious theme of Baldwin's novel has centered on whether or not the author's treatment of religion is reverent or critical. Baldwin's portrayal of black religion was initially considered sincere and respectful; Richard K. Barksdale, for example, called the book "essentially a religious novel" free of "mockery," and Harvey Curtis Webster stated that "[Baldwin's] penetration of the mind of John, especially in the scene of his conversion, is as valid as anything in William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* and as moving as the interior monologues in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*." Critics who view Baldwin's novel as a sympathetic treatment of black religion contend that religious faith offers black Americans in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* a moral and political means to bridge the gap between their previous communal experience in the South and existence in the individualized North. Richard A. Courage, for example, noted that *Go Tell It on the Mountain* "highlights the role of the black church in maintaining a sense of communal identity in the face of socially and psychologically destructive pressures."

In contrast to critics who accept Baldwin's portrayal of religion as sincere, many have read *Go Tell It on the Mountain* as an ironic critique of religion. This group views John's faith as a means by which white society inflicts guilt and self-hatred upon blacks—citing, for example, John's obsession with the Biblical association of blackness with dirt and evil, and whiteness with cleanliness and goodness. John experiences his spiritual conversion to Christianity as a violent, convulsive seizure on "the threshing floor" of his father's church, during which his mind is flooded by hallucinatory images. While some reviewers have interpreted this scene as signifying his salvation and rebirth, Howard M. Harper has contended that John's acceptance of religious ecstasy results falsely from his need for fatherly acceptance. Bone, while insisting that John's conversion is genuine, believes that "he is too young, too frightened, and too innocent to grasp the implications of his choice." Critics have also remarked that John's rebirth represents his acceptance of his blackness or his awareness of his own

artistic nature; others, such as Stanley Macebuh and C. W. E. Bigsby, have expanded on Baldwin's statements in various essays concerning his own attitude towards his sexuality as a youth. Suggesting that John's religious transcendence results from his recognition of his homosexuality, Bigsby commented: "John's conversion is not the result of spiritual revelation but of a homosexual attraction for Elisha, a young Negro convert. . . . While setting out to establish the desirability and viability of compassion, Baldwin can only visualize this love in terms of sexual alliances, more particularly in terms of homosexual relationships."

Most initial critics commended *Go Tell It on the Mountain* as the achievement of an up-and-coming young novelist rather than a work of lasting significance. Wallace Graves later suggested that "these praises may well have been clouded by a politeness engendered by Caucasian guilt or by the confusion of the reviewers between one's conventional education being broadened into a relatively untilled field (the experience of the Negro) as opposed to a true engendering of one's understanding and forgiveness which is native to the novel irrespective of its topic." However, the diverse and continuing interpretations surrounding *Go Tell It on the Mountain* have served to reflect the complexity and ambiguity of the work. As Stanley Macebuh noted, "*Go Tell* may be seen as a very subtle essay on the effects of social oppression on a minority group, as an attack on the excesses and snares of black inspirational worship, or as a passionate plea for love in personal relationships. . . . The essential achievement of this novel is ultimately not that there are so many perspectives from which it may be seen to have meaning, but that these perspectives coalesce into an astutely integrated vision."

(See also *Contemporary Authors*, Vols. 1-4, rev. ed., Vol. 124 [obituary]; *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series*, Vols. 3, 24; *Contemporary Authors Bibliographical Series*, Vol. 1; *Black Writers*; *Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography, 1941-1968*; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vols. 2, 7, 33; *Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook: 1987*; and *Something about the Author*, Vols. 9, 54.)

PRINCIPAL WORKS

NOVELS

- Go Tell It on the Mountain* 1953
Giovanni's Room 1956
Another Country 1962
Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone 1968
If Beale Street Could Talk 1974
Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood 1976
Just above My Head 1979
Harlem Quartet 1987

ESSAYS

- Notes of a Native Son* 1955
Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son 1961
The Fire Next Time 1963

Black Anti-Semitism and Jewish Racism [with others] 1969

Menschenwürde und Gerechtigkeit [with Kenneth Kaunda] 1969

No Name in the Street 1972

The Devil Finds Work 1976

PLAYS

The Amen Corner 1955

Giovanni's Room 1957

Blues for Mister Charlie 1964

A Deed from the King of Spain 1974

OTHER

Autobiographical Notes 1953

Going to Meet the Man (stories) 1965

This Morning, This Evening, So Soon (novella) 1967

A Rap on Race [with Margaret Mead] (dialogue) 1971

One Day, When I Was Lost: A Scenario Based on 'The Autobiography of Malcolm X' [adaptor; from Alex Haley's novel of the same title] (screenplay) 1972

A Dialogue [with Nikki Giovanni] 1973

Jimmy's Blues: Selected Poems 1983

The Evidence of Things Not Seen (nonfiction) 1985

The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985 1985

J. Saunders Redding

[In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*], James Baldwin has used the familiar story-within-a-story device to produce good entertainment—and something more; even the most insensitive of readers will put the book down with a troubled feeling of having "looked on beauty bare."

It is not, however, the kind of beauty to which lazy senses respond—no honeysuckle and moonlight, no pastoral charm or urban elegance, no pure young love, no soft, sweet lostness of the brave and the damned. Its beauty is the beauty of sincerity and of the courageous facing of hard, subjective truth. This is not to say that there is nothing derivative—of what first novel can this be said?—but James Baldwin's critical judgments are perspicacious and his esthetic instincts sound, and he has read Faulkner and Richard Wright and, very possibly, Dostoevski to advantage. A little of each is here—Faulkner in the style, Wright in the narrative, and the Russian in the theme. And yet style, story and theme are Baldwin's own, made so by the operation of the strange chemistry of talent which no one fully understands.

Baldwin's style is lucid and free-running but involved. It is a style that shows the man to be keenly sensitive to words. The frame story of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is relatively slight. It is a simple account of what frustration does to an adolescent boy named John Grimes. The fact of his being a Negro has little significance other than as description. John could have been any susceptible fifteen-year-old, illegitimate boy, hated by his stepfather, es-

tranged by younger children from his mother, and forced to live within himself. But living within oneself is unnatural for a physically healthy boy in Harlem, and John, in a violent burst of seeking for he knows not what, finds another world.

If this frame story is slight, the narratives that fill it are not. In them we are made acquainted with the separate stories of John's mother, Elizabeth, and his father, Gabriel. These are expository narratives, interesting as drama, significant as foreshadowing. The theme of them is frustration. They take the reader out of Harlem to Georgia and Baltimore, and throw a searching light into the murky depths of marginal existence. These stories are two long short stories embodied in the novel, but they are as essential to it as the novel's theme itself. They tell not only the how but the why, and the reader, through them, is brought flush to an understanding of young John's life.

The theme is an old one—the search for a father. What James Baldwin seems to be saying is that the human being's need for identification with others is one of the major drives in life. Though one may quarrel with James Baldwin's explication of this theme—and, indeed, the embodied narratives make quarreling inevitable—one cannot deny that the author has explored the theme with a maturity surprising in a new, young writer.

It is a cliché to say that a first novel shows promise. But what does one say when a first novel is fulfillment?

J. Saunders Redding, in a review of "Go Tell It on the Mountain," in New York Herald Tribune Book Review, May 17, 1953, p. 5.

Donald Barr

[Go Tell It on the Mountain] is about pietism in Harlem—and, of the three sorts of novel (string, wind and percussion), it belongs to the first. It does not produce its story as an accumulation of shocks (as most novels of Negro life do), or by puffing into a rigid metaphysical system (as most novels about religion do); it makes its utterance by tension and friction.

The organizing event of the book is a 14-year-old boy's first religious experience. This experience is a fit, a brutal, unexpected seizure; for poor little John Grimes is the son, or thinks he is, of a deacon in one of the stomping, moaning, falling sects that ululate in converted stories around Harlem, the metropolis of grief. As a matter of fact, John and his real father had never known of each other's existence; Gabriel Grimes, a preaching widower up from the South, hard, without laughter, with a touch of the Messianic in his nature and a good deal of the trapped animal, had married John's mother and accepted John in expiation of his own carnal sins.

While John is in the holy spasm, Mr. Baldwin (who has really unusual substantive powers but conventional ingenuity in form) passes through three generations to find the antecedents of that hour. He has a curious attitude toward religion. He respects it. He does not find it comical, or anthropological, or pathetic. At its most grotesque, he will still have us know it in its own terms.

It is easy to explain. When the slaves, bred like animals and denied an equity in their own lives, were sent forth into monogamy, civil existence and the labor market, they received both freedom and the Law in the same instant. They then had the need of religion. In the religion that was most available (a vulgar export-model Puritanism) the notion of sin was central and fearfully inclusive. It included all but the most joyless releases of human needs. Guilt, guilt, guilt chimes through the book. Gabriel is guilty. His first wife Deborah is guilty, though she was the victim of rape. His second wife Elizabeth is guilty, though she loved much. Guilt is visited on his children. Hypocrisy will not sweeten the tragic dissonance. And guilt could not be removed not by everyday contrition or penance—only by being born again altogether, as in baptism, but with huge pangs and convulsions. So it is writhing on the floor of "The Temple of the Fire Baptized" that John is saved.

Judicious men in their chairs may explain the sociology of guilt, and so explain Negro religion away. Mr. Baldwin will not have it away. In this beautiful, furious first novel, there are no such reductions.

Donald Barr, "Guilt Was Everywhere," in The New York Times, May 17, 1953, p. 5.

T. E. Cassidy

[Go Tell It on the Mountain] is a novel about Harlem's store-front churches, seen through the eyes of the people who go to one of them. These people have blood and flesh in their church, and in their past in the South, and it would seem that, therefore, their story would be of wonder, strength, tragedy, and sometimes beauty. The story is of all these things, partly. But it is not what the author hopes it will be, when he says of his intentions: "It is a fairly deliberate attempt to break out of what I always think of as the 'cage' of Negro writing. I wanted my people to be people first, Negroes almost incidentally."

He has not really accomplished that in this book, because there is always the absolute feeling of injustice toward a people, not as people, but as a race of people. The disasters that occur are those that occur only, or largely, because these are Negro people. Their feelings may be those shared in other circumstances by others, but these, here, are clearly marked 'Negro.' Yet the mark of the spirit is here, that which can be seen in any experience of men who have a sense of sin and a sense of repentance.

This is the mark that is upon the Grimes family, in one way or another. The tale of John's childhood and growth is the tale of his awakening to his role in the life of the Harlem church where his father is head deacon. The "Temple of the Fire Baptized" is the scene of a revival meeting. During the course of the meeting, the author goes back over the lives of the Grimes family—their individual journeys from the South to the North. The first part ("The Seventh Day") sets the scene and gathers all the family into present focus. In part two, the lives of Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth—sister, brother, and wife—are recorded in relation to each other and to the children, John and Roy. Each of these is a story that leads to a prayer for salvation and hope for the children, especially for John

who is marked for the elect. The last part is "The Threshing Floor," the wrestling arena where John meets the Lord and the sword-test of the soul.

Temptation stalks everyone, and wins and loses alternately. Gabriel, for example, "hated the evil that lived in his body, and he feared it, as he feared and hated the lions of lust and longing that prowled the defenseless city of his mind." Elizabeth had been told by her father to "weep, when she wept, alone; never to let the world see, never to ask for mercy; if one had to die, to go ahead and die, but never to let oneself be beaten." And Florence, as she finds her way to the Lord, was "as though she had been hurled outward into time, where no boundaries were, for the voice was the voice of her mother, but the hands were the hands of death."

There are many strong and powerful scenes in this work. Mr. Baldwin has his eye clearly on the full values that his sincere characters possess, though these values often are tossed aside and trampled. His people have an enormous capacity for sin, but their capacity for suffering and repentance is even greater. I think that is the outstanding quality of this work, a sometimes majestic sense of the failings of men and their ability to work through their misery to some kind of peaceful salvation. Certainly, the spark of the holy fire flashes even through their numerous external misfortunes.

T. E. Cassidy, "The Long Struggle," in The Commonweal, Vol. LVIII, No. 7, May 22, 1953, p. 186.

Granville Hicks

[The essay below was originally published on June 1, 1953 in The New Leader.]

There is a new name to be added to the list of serious and talented young writers—that of James Baldwin. Born in Harlem in 1924, Mr. Baldwin was the son of a preacher, and, he tells us, was a preacher himself from the age of fourteen to the age of seventeen. Shortly after ceasing to preach, he turned to literature, and, in the next few years, he had two fellowships and wrote two books, neither of which was published. Now he has a book in print, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and a very fine book it is.

Readers of the *Partisan Review* may remember Mr. Baldwin as the author of two interesting and disturbing articles, "Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Many Thousands Gone." In these articles he discussed the dangers of indignation in fiction, the problem of stereotypes in fiction about Negroes, and the place of the Negro in American life. Re-reading them now, after reading his novel, one sees them as the statement of a personal and pressing dilemma: acknowledging the bitterness he felt as a Negro, he was putting on record his determination not to allow that bitterness to dominate his work as a novelist.

Go Tell It on the Mountain is the result of that struggle and the proof of Baldwin's victory, for there is no danger that it will be pigeonholed as a novel of protest, it neither expresses indignation nor seeks to arouse it, and we do not

think of the characters as victims of injustice or as anything less than human beings.

One writes out of one thing only—one's own experience. [Baldwin has said] Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art. The difficulty then, for me, of being a Negro writer was the fact that I was, in effect, prohibited from examining my own experience too closely by the tremendous demands and the very real dangers of my social situation.

In other words, the Negro problem was there in the foreground, and he had to get behind it to find the kind of reality that seems to him to be the artist's proper concern.

Two other talented Negro novelists, Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, have recently written about Negroes without writing novels of protest. They have done so, however, by demonstrating that the Negro problem is at bottom merely a variant of the human problem: We are all "invisible men," we are all "outsiders." In the long run, we begin to forget that their heroes are Negroes, and that is what they want us to do. Their strategy is excellent, but Baldwin's is even subtler. His novel centers in a characteristic Harlem institution, the storefront church, and we never lose the awareness that we are reading about Negroes. The fact that his characters are Negroes is important, but increasingly we are made to feel that its importance is secondary.

What happens in the novel is that John Grimes gets religion on his fourteenth birthday, and perhaps the most remarkable thing Mr. Baldwin has done is to give this experience an intense reality. In the first part of the novel we see John in his normal range of activities. He is afraid of his father, devoted to his mother, alienated from and worried about his "bad" younger brother. He makes a birthday excursion into the sinful world of Times Square, returns to a family crisis, and helps to prepare for Saturday evening services at the Temple of the Fire Baptized. In the second section, we learn about his father and mother, and then, in the third section, comes the conversion.

"In the context of the Negro problem," Mr. Baldwin has written, "neither whites nor blacks, for excellent reasons of their own, have the faintest desire to look back; but I think that the past is all that makes the present coherent, and further, that the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly." In his novel, he looks steadily at that segment of the past that is relevant to his story. Through the recollections of Gabriel Grimes, John's supposed father, and those of Gabriel's sister Florence, as they take part in the Saturday-evening service, a dramatic and significant story unfolds. Their old mother, born in slavery, links them with the more remote past. They themselves are, in different ways, products of the migration northward. Gabriel's story is marked by violence and sin and the struggle for righteousness, and violence has touched the life of Elizabeth, his wife and John's mother.

The adroitness with which Mr. Baldwin sets these dramas

within the framework of John's conversion is evidence of his skill as a novelist. Yet he never seems obsessed with form, as some of the other young novelists do; it is something that he knows how to make serve his purpose. Indeed, his technical skill, which is remarkable in many ways, is most remarkable for its unobtrusiveness. His narrative is assured and straightforward, and the description of John's seizure achieves its great emotional effect without any fireworks. Best of all is the dialogue, with its strong, authentic rhythms. Everything about the book bears witness to a mastery that is astonishing in so young a novelist.

The strange and fatal conflict between ideal and reality is the theme of this book, as it is of much of the world's greatest literature. The principal characters of the novel are sustained by their peculiarly dogmatic and violent interpretation of Christianity. The faith of Gabriel and Deborah and Elizabeth, and of Praying Mother Washington and Sister McCandless and Brother Elisha, is grotesque but dignified. They are the saved, set apart from the rest of the world, and their lives have meaning; but for this high privilege they pay by their adherence to a code of morality that puts a heavy burden on weak human flesh and may result, as it has resulted with Gabriel, in sins worse than those against which the saints preach.

Mr. Baldwin makes us fully aware of the meaning of religion for these people, and, because we have seen enough of Gabriel and Elizabeth to understand the tensions of John's childhood, his conversion becomes a climax for us as well as for him. Mr. Baldwin wisely drops the story there. There are intimations that there will be other climaxes for John, but it is enough that we understand why the conversion has happened and what, for the moment, it means to him.

Mr. Baldwin has said that he wants to be "an honest man and a good writer." It is obvious that he has had a tremendous struggle against attitudes on the part of others, and emotions within himself, that might have made him a more or less dishonest propagandist; but he has achieved his goal, and he has also achieved, as a consequence of the struggle, a phenomenal maturity. (pp. 87-90)

Granville Hicks, "Go Tell It on the Mountain," in his *Literary Horizons: A Quarter Century of American Fiction, compiled with the assistance of Jack Alan Robbins*, New York University Press, 1970, pp. 87-90.

"[Go Tell It on the Mountain] is a fairly deliberate attempt to break out of what I always think of as the 'cage' of Negro writing. I wanted my people to be people first, Negroes almost incidentally."

—James Baldwin, 1953

Colin MacInnes

[The essay excerpted below was originally published in August, 1963 in *Encounter*.]

This [*Go Tell It on the Mountain*] is a densely-packed, ominous, sensual, doom-ridden story, lit by rare beauty, love and human penetration. The theme is life and religion and how both, wonderful and terrible, can create and destroy. The scene is the Temple of the Fire Baptized in Harlem during two days and a long night; from which place the writer leads us back and forth in time among the lives of worshippers in the congregation.

The prime figures are Gabriel the deacon, proud, passionate, violent and unforgiving as Satan, yet taking none of Satan's sweets (unless perhaps the love of power), and still wrestling inexorably with his God; and his adoptive son John, aged 14 (who believes Gabriel to be his father), torn between hatred of his parent and the wish to love him, and between the force of his own animal and mental life, and the hope of submission to salvation.

Gabriel, who is from the South, is twice married: first to Deborah, a sad sterile saint who was once raped by whites, and then to Elizabeth, whose bitter and beautiful lover Richard was killed himself leaving her the infant John. Gabriel has thus taken two "fallen" women—and is, we learn, responsible himself for yet another "fall"—that of Esther, a southern beauty who gives him a son, Royal, whom he rejects with shame and yearning.

By Elizabeth, his second wife, Gabriel has three children, the first-born being the defiant and irreligious Roy whom he beats and secretly adores. Gabriel's sister Florence who is, so to speak, the deacon's human—if not religious—conscience, has also lost her charming wastrel husband Frank. The chief remaining character is Brother Elisha, a sweet-natured, fervent young pastor of the church who stands in relation to young John as a true brother.

All this may seem something of a mouthful—as indeed it sometimes does even in the novel, where the author makes severe demands on our attention. We may also notice that, among these blasted and determined lives, there are three disastrous marriages, two tragic love affairs, three rapes or seductions, and that four of the most adjusted and potentially happy characters meet violent ends; also that the sole other unself-torturing personage in the book, the young pastor Elisha, is the only one who is not, as all the others are, related.

This bald synopsis may conjure up the notion of a melodrama, but the book is not like that at all. In the first place Baldwin never makes his characters suffer—or even die—unless they, so to say, "have to": unless, that is, the tragedy both arises from their inner natures and explains them. (A sure sign, incidentally, of an able writer is that he will never do violence to his creations unless this is, artistically, quite inevitable; whereas inferior writers strike their characters arbitrarily down for superficial effect—thereby throwing the whole story out of human balance.) The next reality about this misery and drama is that these are, by implication, a consequence of the Negro situation in the United States. For though this novel is less overtly a decla-