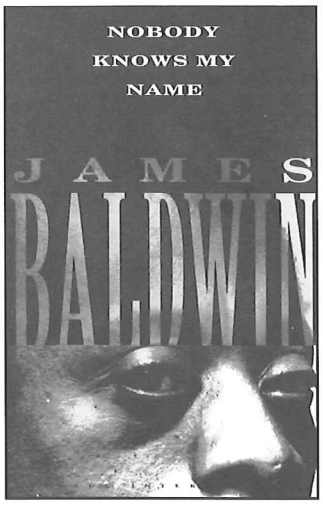
Nobody Knows My Name

and

The Fire Next Time

by James Baldwin



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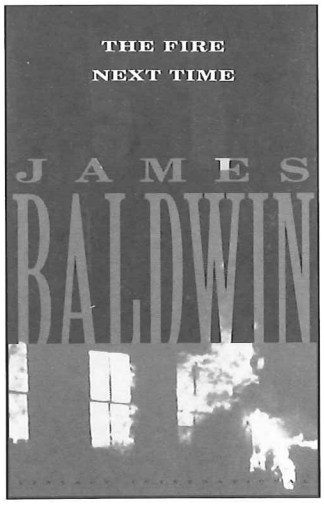

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Note to teachers

Nobody Knows My Name (1961—the year of the Freedom Riders) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963—the year of the March on Washington) were first published when the civil rights movement was in full sway across the United States. James Baldwin had already been acclaimed as the successor to Richard Wright and as a leading spokesman for black Americans. His first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), was greeted as an important portrait of black life in the United States; *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), his first collection of essays, introduced a clear, penetrating voice in the national debate. *Giovanni's Room* (1956), focusing on a young man torn between homosexual love and love for a woman, added controversy to praise. In 1962—as James Meredith became the first black student at the University of Mississippi—*Another Country*, a powerful novel of racial and sexual identity and relationships, added to Baldwin's renown. A year later *The Fire Next Time* consolidated his position as one of the country's most important writers.

By the time of his death in 1987, Baldwin had created an impressive body of fiction, nonfiction, drama, and verse; but it may be argued that he was most in command of his gifts and his audience in his nonfiction of the early to mid-1960s. He remains important as a spokesman against discrimination of every kind and as a moving portrayer of interracial relationships in both the private and public spheres. Perhaps the most enduring "message," expounded from his first book on, was the redemptive power of love—understood with both a prophetic, Biblical fierceness and a penetrating secular, everyday clarity of vision forged, Baldwin might argue, as art's necessary response to American racism's unrelenting presence. In both fiction and nonfiction he contended unstintingly that blacks and whites must work to understand and accept one another with love. He also insisted that everyone must understand his or her past and present reality, and that one must commit oneself to act upon that understanding. Nor did he soft-pedal the risk: "To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger."

Particularly in his essays—from *Notes of a Native Son* onward—James Baldwin

directly addressed social, cultural, and personal issues of importance to him as a black man in America and as a writer, and of critical importance to all Americans. Here, as in all his work, he was involved in a search—as an individual, an artist, and a Negro (Baldwin's term)—for a meaningful, rewarding way of living in a world that constantly throws up barriers to love, understanding, and personal growth and fulfillment. He chronicled this search, this ongoing struggle, through a rich style that draws on a stunning range of idioms, from spirituals to Jamesian stream of consciousness, from evangelical hyperbole to Hemingwayesque understatement and the rhetoric of jazz. In both structure and tone, the elegance of a Beethoven concerto is in counterpoint to the wail of a Bessie Smith blues recording, as Baldwin presents his views on black-white relations, the relationship between the artist and society, relationships between—and among—the sexes, and the interplay between America's character and destiny.

Preparing to read

The questions and topics that follow (others, of course, may occur to you and your students) are designed for in-class discussion and written or oral assignments, to guide your students through *Nobody Knows My Name* and *The Fire Next Time*, and to help them approach both books as finely structured, fully realized works that address issues that continue to involve all Americans. In both *The Fire Next Time* and *Nobody Knows My Name* Baldwin confronts himself, other artists, his fellow countrymen, and his country. "On this confrontation," he writes in the Introduction, "depends the measure of our wisdom and compassion. This energy is all that one finds in the rubble of vanished civilizations, and the only hope for ours."

Baldwin's treatment of personal themes—the complex rewards and dangers of love, the need for self-awareness and responsibility, the quest for personal achievement and fulfillment, the creation of one's own identity, the complexities of human relationships, all within a given social context—will engage students in terms of their own lives and aspirations.

***The Fire Next Time:* Structure and Themes**

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 are the details of the spiritual geography of Baldwin's adolescence as presented in the first part of "Down at the Cross"? How are they related to his advice to his nephew in "My Dungeon Shook"?
3) 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?
4) What are the reasons for and circumstances of the seventeen-year-old Baldwin's renunciation of his religious calling and of Christianity itself?
5) 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?
6) What is Baldwin's purpose in prefacing the long "public" essay-letter on the Nation of Islam with his shorter, personal letter to his nephew?
7) 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?
8) What are the links among sexual awakening, crime, religion, racial discrimination, and self-realization in *The Fire Next Time*? What are their personal and public implications?

Nobody Knows My Name: Structure and Themes

1) What is the significance of the book's title, the title of each of its two parts, and the title of each essay?

2) What determines the two-part structure of the book? Do the essays in each part have significant elements—concerns, themes, arguments, etc.—in common? Is there a definite progression or pattern of development from the first essay in each part to the last? From the Introduction to "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy"?

3) In his Introduction, Baldwin writes that "Nothing is more desirable than to be released from an affliction, but nothing is more frightening than to be divested of a crutch" (p. xii). What are the "affliction" and the "crutch"? In what ways throughout the essays does he identify and illustrate them? Are they, in any instances, the same? Do they appear in *The Fire Next Time*?

4) Baldwin makes extensive use of irony and paradox throughout these essays. Identify specific instances of each and explain what those instances—and Baldwin's reliance upon irony and paradox, in general—reveal about his views and concerns and his way of expressing them. How do irony and paradox contribute to the richness and complexity of Baldwin's style?

5) What kinds of exile does Baldwin write about in the essays, both explicitly and implicitly? What does Baldwin's treatment of the fact and concept of exile reveal about his attitude toward the artist's life, the lives of black Americans, and America in general?

6) How does the dominant theme, argument, or concern of each essay relate to the overall thrust and burden of the book? How successful is Baldwin in clearly defining, presenting, or persuading us of the primary "message" of each essay?

7) What were the circumstances in which black Southern parents sent their children to all-white schools in the early 1960s and their reasons for doing so? Are these circumstances and reasons still in operation?

8) On what authority does Baldwin base his categorization of young blacks in Harlem in "Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem"? Does his description have any relevance or applicability in urban America today?

9) In "Faulkner and Desegregation," Baldwin poses specific challenges to his readers. What are those challenges? Do they remain appropriate challenges? How are they related to Baldwin's dominant concerns?

10) In "In Search of a Majority," what elements—political, social, moral, cultural, and intellectual—contribute to Baldwin's concept of "the majority"? How does his definition compare with Thoreau's "majority of one" ("Civil Disobedience"), with Andrew Jackson's (attributed) remark that "One man with courage makes a majority," and with reformer-abolitionist Wendell Phillips's statement that "One on God's side is a majority"? Does Baldwin's concept of the majority fall within a continuing American tradition?

11) In "The Male Prison," what is the lesson of Gide's "sorrow"? What are its implications?

12) What does Baldwin mean in "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel" when he refers to Americans as "a handful of incoherent people in an incoherent country"? How does this relate to other statements in *Nobody Knows My Name* (and in *The Fire Next Time*) about the American character and American society, history, and culture?

The Fire Next Time and _Nobody Knows My Name_: Points of Comparison

1) In his Introduction to *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin writes: "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..." (p. xii). How does Baldwin identify and characterize these social forces in each book? In what ways had they become interior and with what implication for Baldwin's own development, the progression of each book, and his readers?

2) On the evidence of the two books, what system of values does Baldwin find to replace the Christianity renounced when he was seventeen? Does he present a coherent moral or ethical vision that is applicable within both the personal and social spheres? Does he remain consistent with such statements as ". . . the inequalities suffered by the many are in no way justified by the rise of a few"(*Nobody Knows My Name*, p. 61)?

3) Where does Baldwin present the propositions (and why does he choose to formulate them the way he does) that: 1) ". . . the American Negro . . .is an American, too, and he will survive or perish with the country" (*Nobody Knows My Name*, p. 78); and, 2) that blacks and whites in America are inevitably and inextricably bound together, and will prosper or fail—individually and as a nation—together? "Whether I like it or not, or whether you like it or not, we are bound together forever" (*Nobody Knows My Name*, p. 136). Is his presentation of these arguments persuasive?

4) What specific elements, devices, and techniques of structure and style—or example, comparison and contrast, imagery, example and illustration, metaphor, argument, description, categorization—does Baldwin use most extensively? Are any predominant? How do they contribute to the strength, clarity, richness, and persuasiveness of his writing?

5) Compare the autobiographical elements and concerns present in the two books. Do they provide us with an understanding of how Baldwin arrived at the attitudes, values, and concerns of his maturity?

6) Baldwin consistently links the subject or main theme(s) of an essay to—or roots it in—his own life, career, feelings, or observations. How effective is it in terms of the reader's reception of his message?

7) In *Nobody Knows My Name*, "Princes and Powers," Baldwin writes that ". . . [George] Lamming was suggesting . . . that part of the great wealth of the Negro experience lay precisely in its double-edgedness . . . that all Negroes were held in a state of supreme tension between the difficult, dangerous relationship in which they stood to the white world and the relationship, not a whit less painful or dangerous, in which they stood to each other. . . . [and] that in the acceptance of this duality lay their strength, that in this, precisely, lay their means of defining and controlling the world in which they lived" (pp. 42-43). To what extent does this reflect Baldwin's own experience, as reported in these books, and what he has to say about black-white relationships, on every level?

8) In *Nobody Knows My Name*, "Princes and Powers," Baldwin writes: "As a black Westerner, it was difficult to know what one's attitude should be toward three realities which were inextricably woven together in the Western fabric. These were religion, tradition, and imperialism . . ." (p. 45). Does he approach each of the three from the same perspective?

9) One of Baldwin's main arguments is encapsulated as follows: "The reason that it is important—of the utmost importance—for white people, here, to see the Negroes as people like themselves is that white people will not, otherwise, be able to see themselves as they are. . . . And this long history of moral evasion has had an unhealthy effect on the total life of the country . . ." (*Nobody Knows My Name*, p. 75, p. 77). What other instances, in both books, of this argument can you cite?

10) In *Nobody Knows My Name*, "The Northern Protestant," Baldwin writes of Ingmar Bergman that "the landscape of Bergman's mind was simply the

landscape in which he had grown up" (p. 166). What does he mean by this? Based on what he reveals about his own family background, childhood, and adolescence in the two books, is the landscape of Baldwin's mind the landscape in which he grew up?

11) "I am far from certain that I am able to read my own record at all, I would certainly hesitate to say that I am able to read it right" (p. 200). Coming where it does, near the end of *Nobody Knows My Name*, what impact does this statement have on our acceptance of everything that precedes it in this book and of everything in *The Fire Next Time*?

12) 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?

13) In the final sentence of *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin writes of Norman Mailer that he ". . . has a real vision of ourselves as we are, and it cannot be too often repeated in this country now, that, where there is no vision, the people perish" (p. 241). How does this statement reflect back on what Baldwin is attempting in both books, on his stated and implied purpose for writing, and on the "vision" of America—of the lives of black and white Americans—he presents in the two books?

In General

1) In his Introduction to *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin writes that ". . . the question which confronted me . . . was: Am I afraid of returning to America? Or am I afraid of journeying any further with myself?" (p. xiii). What are the levels of meaning and the full implications of the phrase "returning to America" for Baldwin? Based on both books, in what ways and with what consequences did Baldwin return to America? In what ways did he journey "further with myself" and further into himself? With what consequences? Do the two journeys converge?

2) Baldwin writes that "...my own experience proves to me that the connection between American whites and blacks is far deeper and more passionate than any of us like to think." (*Nobody Knows My Name*, p. xiii). What evidence does he provide in both books in support or illustration of this statement? What is the nature of the passion that characterizes the deep, complex relationship between American blacks and whites?

3) In each instance in which a book, section, or essay title has a literary or other source, what is that source and what is the relationship between the source and the book, section, or essay? Does each of these titles provide a focus for the contents of the text?

4) Can you summarize Baldwin's views on the role and status of the artist in the United States?

5) Some of the idioms employed by Baldwin are black American spirituals and hymns, stream of consciousness, understatement, jazz and the blues, personal reverie, and political rhetoric. Discuss Baldwin's artistic decision to combine these elements and describe their cumulative effect.

6) How does music in its various styles—jazz, spiritual, blues, classical, etc.—contribute to Baldwin's writing and to his view of life? Can we compare Baldwin's writing in these two books with those of any musical genres?

7) How are the patterns of images listed below introduced and developed? Is each associated with specific issues, arguments, settings, or concerns? What function does each have in relationship to Baldwin's personal and artistic concerns and beliefs and to his views of issues and developments critical to life in America?

Wilderness/Jungle and Garden; Fire and Water; Chaos and Order; Religious Ritual and Practices; Motion and Stasis/Stagnation; Slavery/Imprisonment and Freedom; Dominance and Subservience; Tyranny and Equality/Democracy; Acting (masks, performing, etc.); Black and White, Dark and Light, Night and Day; Violence/Struggle and Peace/Comfort; Scarcity and Abundance; Disease/Degeneration/Death and Well-being/Growth/Regeneration; Exile and Home; Sexuality and Lifelessness; Money and Poverty; Innocence and Experience.

8) Why does Baldwin ascribe such importance to independence of mind?

9) In *Nobody Knows My Name*, "Alas Poor Richard," Baldwin speaks of "telling the tale" (p. 189). What does he mean by that phrase?

10) Apply what Baldwin writes about Ingmar Bergman and his movies—in *Nobody Knows My Name*, "The Northern Protestant"—and about what he reveals of his own religious heritage and experience to one of the Bergman films cited by Baldwin. To what extent are Bergman's themes, as identified by Baldwin and as revealed in the Swedish director's films, those of Baldwin as well?

11) Apply Baldwin's comments on Richard Wright's writing and views to either to Black Boy or to Native Son. Does Baldwin present an accurate portrait of Wright's achievements and shortcomings?

12) 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?

13) "Yet, it is only when a man is able," Baldwin writes, "without bitterness or self-pity, to surrender a dream he has long cherished or a privilege he has long possessed that he is set free—he has set himself free-for higher dreams, for greater privileges" (*Nobody Knows My Name*, p. 117). Why does Baldwin choose this formulation? How does it apply to America in general?

14) How true, in your experience, is Baldwin's statement in *Nobody Knows My Name*, (p. 131) that, in America, status is a substitute for identity?

For Discussion or Assignment

1) Discuss Baldwin's view of race relations and its meaning for the present.

2) James Baldwin stands as one of the master practitioners of the personal essay in English.

For Further Reading

James Baldwin: *Go Tell It on the Mountain, Notes of a Native Son, Giovanni's Room, Going to Meet the Man, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, If Beale Street Could Talk*; David Bradley: *The Chaneysville Incident*; Claude Brown: *Manchild in the Promised Land*; Eldridge Cleaver: *Soul on Ice*; Stanley Crouch: *The All-American Skin Game, or, The Decoy of Race*; Frederick Douglass: *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*; W. E. B. Du Bois: *Dusk of Dawn (Autobiography), The Souls of Black Folk*; John Ehle: *The Journey of August King*; Ralph Ellison: *Invisible Man, Going to the Territory, Shadow and Act*; William Faulkner: *Absalom, Absalom!, Intruder in the Dust, Light in August*; Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Letter from the Birmingham Jail;" Jonathan Kozol: *Death at an Early Age, Rachel and Her Children, Amazing Grace*; Norman Mailer: "The White Negro;" Malcolm X: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; Toni Morrison: *The Bluest Eye, Sula, Tar Baby, Song of Solomon, Beloved, Jazz*; Theodore Rosengarten: *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*; Henry Roth: *Call It Sleep*; Henry David Thoreau: *Walden*, "On Civil Disobedience;" Booker T. Washington: *Up from Slavery*; Cornel West: *Race Matters*; Walt Whitman: *Leaves of Grass* (1855 Edition); John Edgar Wideman: *The Lynchers, Sent for You Yesterday, All Stories Are True*; Tom Wolfe: *Radical Chic*; Richard Wright: *Black Boy, Eight Men, Native Son.*

Teacher's notes

This teacher's guide was written by Hal Hager. Hal Hager taught literature at several colleges for ten years and has been active in editing, marketing, reviewing, and writing about books and writers for more than twenty years.

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