



The Furious Passage of James Baldwin

Fern Marja Eckman

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He has been called passionate and violent, cryptic and probing, hostile and eloquent. His works have been called brilliant and unbearable, poetic and documentary, classic and controversial. He is a major voice of the Civil Rights Movement. His words, which have compelled, agitated and hypnotized a nation, are now heard around the world.

That is the public image of James Baldwin. But there is also an aspect of Baldwin that grew out of self-deprecation and a search for personal identity; a timorous side that his mother worried over in the presence of a step-father who would not acknowledge him, and that his teachers watched carefully because there was precocity beneath it, trying to force its way out. There was a child who thought he was ugly and useless, who was overly self-conscious about his appearance and couldn't find the love he needed to make his own existence bearable. There is a man who claims: *"I've been scared to death since I was born and I'll be scared till I die. But if you're scared to death, walk toward it."* And there is an author whose tremendous impact on American literature—and American life—has, until now, not been fully measured.

Fern Marja Eckman has based this vivid book on hours and hours of taped interviews with Baldwin and with the people who are significant in his story. She presents a detailed account of Baldwin's Harlem childhood, a portrait of the exile who returned to his country to shock it into reappraisal of its racial and sexual attitudes, and an inside view of his part in Robert Kennedy's civil-rights meeting in 1963. Speaking with James Baldwin and probing the complex mixture of extreme hate and intense love that characterize him, she presents a profile told largely in his own words—one which is essentially Baldwin on Baldwin.

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