

A Unique Biography: James Baldwin, Man and Artist
Review of *The Furious Passage of James Baldwin*
by Fern Marja Eckman
M. Evans & Company, Inc., New York. \$4.50

Several years ago, the morning sun was momentarily blown out by a cold lambent wind, as a ferry boat threw itself against its moorings like a crazed waterbeast.

Uptown, in a Manhattan apartment, another man, who could have been the boatman's twin, was awakening to a breakfast of coffee, and a day he'd greet as a gift long hoped for but never expected.

For the father of four novels, two plays, and a host of assorted writings and speeches, had passed his 40th years as an American Negro who refuses *not* to be one. Still, somehow, warding off the insanity that killed his stepfather, somehow, still surviving the introverted spotlight of a tendentious intelligence.

Venetian blinds squeeze out the bright sunlight, simulating his favorite mood of day, twilight.

He sips his coffee, lights another cigarette, and begins to fill a reel of recording tape in a halting, melodic cadence...

“The reason I will never hate anybody again is that it's---it's too---too *demeaning* a confession, you know, on your own part, if you *need* to hate somebody. It means that you're *afraid* of the *other* thing, y'know---which is *love* and be *loved*, which is *another* confession.”

At first sight, it seems precocious to write the biography of a writer still very much *aline*. But this isn't an ordinary biography, as James Baldwin isn't an ordinary writer/ If the artist has no choice but to be an artist, Baldwin had less than no choice. It was: make it as a writer, or perish in the black bag he hated and didn't understand. Haunted by the love-hate relationship with his stepfather, pursued by “Charlie,” hallucinations of the Negro, doubtful of even his claim to manhood---Baldwin writes and lives only for his salvation, and thus the freedom of his race.

James Baldwin is a writer who can't be judged by his work alone, for he's an artist, a man, in his own words, “distinguished from all other responsible actors in society...by the fact that he is his own test tube, his own laboratory, working according to very rigorous rules, however unstated these may be, and cannot allow any consideration to supersede his responsibility to reveal all that he can possibly discover concerning the mystery of the human being.”

Thus, the man and his work are one, and *both* must be scrutinized.

For more than 29 months, Fern Marja Eckman. A prize-winning feature writer for the New York Post, followed Baldwin around the country, making tape recordings of his

speeches and remarks. These, along with long, searching talk sessions held in a relaxed milieu, is what makes this book a unique one.

James Baldwin's writings, particularly his novels, may be far from being "great literature," but his gift is that of revelation, a gift of prophecy.

A preacher while still in his teens, a would-be actor, Baldwin became shaman to the Black People of America, working the magic of intellectual catharsis; and guru, a teacher to America's Caucasians. For "...no general, no statesman, no priest and no saint can bear witness to the human condition as the artist must." As "one must be aware of the possibilities of the human spirit and by watching tell what we could---if we only dared---become."

The reel of tape is finally exhausted. James Baldwin sits back, and the ferry is finally calmed of its passengers. Now, one must look very closely to be able to see where the boat leaves off and the pier begins.

And the little black man, who had tied this beast down, has disappeared---probably to get another cup of coffee.

-Joel Weishaus.

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