



Conversations with James Baldwin

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This collection of interviews with James Baldwin covers the period 1961-1987, from the year of the publication of *Nobody Knows My Names*, his fourth book, to just a few weeks before his death. It includes the last formal conversation with him. Twenty-seven interviews reprinted here come from a variety of sources--newspapers, radio, journals, and review--and show this celebrated author in all his eloquence, anger, and perception of racial, social, and literary situations in America.

Over the years Baldwin proved to be an easily accessible and cooperative subject for interviews, both in the United States and abroad. He frequently referred to himself as "a kind of trans-Atlantic commuter." Whether candidly discussing his own ghetto origins, his literary mission and achievements, his role in the civil rights movement, or his views on world affairs, black and white relations, Vietnam, Christianity, and fellow writers, Baldwin was always both popular and controversial.

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Conversations with James Baldwin Details

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Cisily says

i love this book. if you ever wondered just how much Baldwin understands human behavior all you have to do is read this book.

John says

It's interesting...I could be wrong but I don't think Baldwin considered himself a Christian per se. But the attitude he reflects in many situations is totally Christian. When faced with raw racism, he isn't overcome with an all consuming desire for revenge. But rather he reflects on the sorry state of human relations and the sordid upbringing of people that result in feelings of ignorance and prejudice. In other words, he feels sincerely sorry for those who are so warped that they feel wholesale, irrational hatred towards an entire race. (In Notes of a Native Son he relates an incident that pushed him over the brink, but that was early in his life, and a rare exception.)

He is an eloquent writer who is passionate about getting his message across.

Dave says

I can think of no late 20th century literary figure with more nuance and foresight into the subject of America than James Baldwin who, to the extent that in baffling his contemporaries, was able to blow the future wide open. This is a great collection of his dialogues and interviews, where he has dropped pearl after pearl of heavy truth. I had a fantastic time reading it.

Carla Kapeskas says

This book offers great insight into Baldwin's mind and spirit. I enjoyed it.

Emily says

Not sure if I read this in HS at the time I was doing my research project on him... but I bet it would be good! I will have to check it out myself :)

Yordanos says

Since first reading “The Last Conversation with James Baldwin,” I have come to admire him more and seek out his speeches, debates, other recorded conversations, etc more than his written works. His eloquence, both in thought and language, his evolution as a writer, thinker, man, and admirably, his consistency through out the years — it’s simply inspiring!

This extensive collection of conversations allowed me to see and discover more of James Baldwin than anything I have read of or by him so far. In addition to all the beautiful and powerful things I’ve known and loved about him for years, I also got to see the flaws, sad ironies, disconnects, etc of his journey. This, of course, didn’t lessen my admiration for him; rather, it offered a fuller humanity of Jimmy Baldwin.

Interestingly and annoyingly enough, most of these interviews asked about why he left America: underneath some of these questions lay a resentment, a weakly disguised objective to devalue his criticisms/arguments/writings in general about the American problem because he ‘left it behind’...as if an extended period of physical absence severs all ties or revokes any right to take a critical look at what was left behind. I reject and resent this view. As Jimmy explains, with which I fully agree from personal experience, “If I hadn’t gone away, I would never have been able to see it, and if I was unable to see it, I would never have been able to forgive it.”

The American hubris that centers the U.S. and the American experience as a focus and savior of the rest of the world is also, sadly, present here, esp. in the early interviews. Thankfully, this transforms over the years as Jimmy’s encounters with the world expand, particularly after his milieu in the Civil Rights movement (or the 1960s slave insurrection, as he prefers to call it) and travels to Africa.

A favorite conversation from this collection is his dialogue with Chinua Achebe on defining an African/Black aesthetic. A lot of thought-provoking gems from a meeting of such minds; e.g. “Art is unashamedly, unembarrassingly, if there is such a word, social. It is economic. The total life of man is reflected in his art...those who tell you “Do not put too much politics in your art,” are not being honest. If you look very carefully you will see that they are the same people who are quite happy with the situation as it is. What they are saying is not don’t introduce politics. What they are saying is don’t upset the system. They are just as political as any of us. It’s only that they are on the other side.” This conversation happened mere 38 years ago; it’s incredibly timeless and timely. I’m acutely aware of our collective loss in Jimmy’s and Chinua’s permanent (physical)absence, though their works continue to stay relevant and inspire a new generation of witnesses.

I can’t recommend James Baldwin’s works enough; more than his novels/plays/essays, or along with them, I should say, I’d recommend reading/watching his interviews. This specific collection is an excellent place to start!

IamBeLewis says

James has become my favorite. You really get insight into his mind, while also learning some of his writing practices !

Jeremy Williams says

a wonderful collection of interviews and articles displaying Baldwin's consistency of thought, philosophy and critical engagement with the American racial dilemma. A must-read for anyone seriously interested in the life and times of an American icon.

Billy says

Brilliant

Safae says

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