

*New Essays on
Go Tell It on the Mountain*

*Edited by
Trudier Harris*



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Introduction

TRUDIER HARRIS

Background and Composition

GO *Tell It on the Mountain*, James Baldwin's first novel, was published in 1953. It had a long and extensive history of composition, extending across two continents and at least three countries. Baldwin had conceived the idea for the novel in the early 1940s, when he was about seventeen. He would write and rewrite it over the next ten years. An autobiographical composition, the novel takes its subject matter from the troubled relationship between Baldwin and his stepfather, David Baldwin. Little Jimmy was almost three years old in 1927 when his mother, Emma Burdis Jones, married David Baldwin, who legitimized his existence by adopting him. But the legal embrace did not mirror an emotional embrace. A history of racism and religion informed David's interactions with his adopted stepson. The elder Baldwin had come to Harlem from Louisiana, where he had been a preacher. Having less status, but being no less devout in Harlem, he held his family to strict interpretations of biblical texts. Wives were to be obedient and children were to be helpful but invisible; neither was to challenge the authority of the father who, following biblical injunction, was head of his household.

David Baldwin frequently took out his frustrations on the young Jimmy. He considered his stepson ugly and remarked that James had the mark of the devil on him. James's successes at school, which earned him the approval and applause of his white teachers, only exacerbated David. When James was "nine or ten," he wrote a play that was directed by one of his white schoolteachers. Her interest in him inspired her to approach his

father about James attending a “real” play. Although theatergoing was forbidden in the Baldwin house, James watched his father capitulate to the white teacher and grant permission for him to accompany her to the theater. His father had questioned her motives before her arrival, and it was only his general fear of whites that prompted him to give very reluctant consent to the outing. In spite of this woman’s help when David Baldwin was laid off from work, he never trusted her and warned James that his “white friends in high places were not really” his friends and that he would see when he grew older “how white people would do anything to keep a Negro down. Some of them could be nice, he admitted, but none of them were to be trusted and most of them were not even nice. The best thing was to have as little to do with them as possible.”¹ This attitude echoes almost precisely the opinion of Gabriel Grimes in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Baldwin recounts from the point of view of John, Gabriel’s stepson:

His father said that all white people were wicked, and that God was going to bring them low. He said that white people were never to be trusted, and that they told nothing but lies, and that not one of them had ever loved a nigger. He, John, was a nigger, and he would find out, as soon as he got a little older, how evil white people could be.²

David Baldwin could not accept a world in which whites were anything but mean and hateful to blacks. His inability to change his attitudes with his change of geography, combined with his treatment of James, led to an intense hatred that the stepson would nurture for the stepfather. Baldwin’s composition of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was in many ways an extended rite of exorcism. He was trying in part to rid himself of the demons of hatred his stepfather had instilled in him. “I had to understand the forces, the experience, the life that shaped him,” Baldwin would later comment, “before I could grow up myself, before I could become a writer. . . . I became a writer by tearing that book up for ten years.”³

Baldwin recalls the strained relationship between him and his father in the title essay in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955). In that essay, Baldwin reviews his father’s life, his behavior toward his

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wife and children, and the overwhelming bitterness that consumed him:

He could be chilling in the pulpit and indescribably cruel in his personal life and he was certainly the most bitter man I have ever met. . . . When he took one of his children on his knee to play, the child always became fretful and began to cry; when he tried to help one of us with our homework the absolutely unabating tension which emanated from him caused our minds and our tongues to become paralyzed, so that he, scarcely knowing why, flew into a rage and the child, not knowing why, was punished. If it ever entered his head to bring a surprise home for his children, it was, almost unfailingly, the wrong surprise and even the big watermelons he often brought home on his back in the summertime led to the most appalling scenes. I do not remember, in all those years, that one of his children was ever glad to see him come home.⁴

His father, Baldwin asserted, “had lived and died in an intolerable bitterness of spirit.”⁵ Baldwin wondered, on his father’s death in 1943, if that bitterness had not now become his own heritage. He had to find a way of reconciling bitter memories and hatred with the need to move forward into a healthy and hate-free future.

During his father’s lifetime, however, Baldwin was never able to overcome his negative feelings toward him. Angered perhaps that his father was perennially impregnating his mother, and providing yet another baby for whom the young Jimmy, being the eldest child, had to assume caretaking responsibilities, Baldwin’s hatred of his father intensified with the years. Baldwin escaped as soon as he was physically – if not financially – able. With his move first to New Jersey when he was seventeen and shortly thereafter to Greenwich Village, he separated himself from his father physically, but not psychologically. Troubled father/son relationships would prove to be a recurring theme in Baldwin’s works. He later attempted to provide a literary healing in *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), in which a father’s love for his son is so sincere that his inability to get the son out of jail leads him to commit suicide.

Equally central to the composition of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is Baldwin’s religious experience. In “Down at the Cross: Letter

from a Region in My Mind," the second of the two essays in *The Fire Next Time* (1963), Baldwin discusses the physical and spiritual threats he began to feel at the age of fourteen. His own awakening to sexual desire was matched by the attempts of persons in his neighborhood to use him sexually, thus forcing a heightened awareness of the potential to sin and to be damned eternally for it. An acute sense of vulnerability to the forces around him – girls who were taught to begin looking for husbands, adults who exploited children sexually, cops who beat up little black boys – brought young Jimmy to the realization that not only his body but his soul was endangered. As early as his tenth year Baldwin was beaten by policemen in Harlem. The summer when he was fourteen produced "a prolonged religious crisis" in him.⁶ Baldwin sought refuge in a church to which one of his young friends had taken him. The woman minister of that church, Bishop Rosa Artemis (Mother) Horn, asked Baldwin on his first trip there, "Whose little boy are you?" Baldwin recalls that the question made him feel so welcome, so wanted, that his heart immediately replied, "Why, yours." In order to escape the ravages of the street, he thus turned to the religious "gimmick" as opposed to the criminal or sexual one. He recognized that

every Negro boy – in my situation during those years, at least – who reaches this point realizes, at once, profoundly, because he wants to live, that he stands in great peril and must find, with speed, a "thing," a gimmick, to lift him out, to start him on his way. *And it does not matter what the gimmick is.* It was this last realization that terrified me and – since it revealed that the door opened on so many dangers – helped to hurl me into the church.⁷

His transformation/conversion is mirrored in the experience of the young John Grimes in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Baldwin recalls:

[W]hen this woman had finished preaching, everything came roaring, screaming, crying out, and I fell to the ground before the altar. It was the strangest sensation I have ever had in my life – up to that time, or since. I had not known that it was going to happen, or that it could happen. One moment I was on my feet, singing and clapping and, at the same time, working out in my head the plot of a play I was working

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on then; the next moment, with no transition, no sensation of falling, I was on my back, with the lights beating down into my face and all the vertical saints above me. I did not know what I was doing down so low, or how I had got there. And the anguish that filled me cannot be described. It moved in me like one of those floods that devastate countries, tearing everything down, tearing children from their parents and lovers from each other, and making everything an unrecognizable waste. All I really remember is the pain, the unspeakable pain; it was as though I were yelling up to Heaven and Heaven would not hear me. And if Heaven would not hear me, if love could not descend from heaven – to wash me, to make me clean – then utter disaster was my portion.⁸

Baldwin joined Mother Horn's church and became an ardent follower, so much so that his brother David was somewhat perturbed by the transformation in Jimmy. The older brother was no fun anymore; he did not want to go to movies or engage in any of the other activities common to young boys. The church may have gained a devotee, but David was being denied an engaged, interesting brother.

Baldwin remained in Mother Horn's church until he was seventeen. He served as a "Young Minister"; his youth made him "a much bigger drawing card" than his father, and he "pushed this advantage ruthlessly." At the same time, he "relished the attention and the relative immunity from punishment" that his "new status" gave him.⁹ The competition between Baldwin and his father is echoed in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, when young John Grimes tries to gain an advantage over his father Gabriel by joining the church. Although the novel does not portray John in a minister's role, that is clearly the status into which the saints are hoping he will grow.

Baldwin said he left the church when he realized that all the "sermons" and "tears" and "repentance" and "rejoicing" had "changed nothing." He also became disillusioned with the "gimmick," with the "illusion" and how it was effected. After all those years of avoiding the theater, he asserted, he had actually been in one the whole time. This idea of the black church as theater or performance, especially the more charismatic churches such as the Pentecostal one to which Baldwin belonged, engaged

Baldwin's creative imagination, not only in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, but in *The Amen Corner* (1968) as well. Hellfire and damnation, or the fear of hell instead of the promise of heaven, was the underlying premise for the church in which Baldwin's religious ideas were shaped. People were to live righteously, literally by biblical injunction, or suffer the disastrous consequences of not having done so. Baldwin finally escaped the physical structure of the church, but the imaginative and spiritual impact remained with him throughout his writing career. More immediately, these shaping forces informed *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Baldwin originally entitled the novel *Crying Holy*, then *In My Father's House*; he alternated the titles off and on through 1951.

Baldwin began serious work on his first novelistic venture after he moved to Greenwich Village permanently in 1943 (he had lived there intermittently before). He worked as a waiter at the Calypso, a small restaurant on MacDougal Street owned by Connie Williams.¹⁰ With encouragement from Williams and others, Baldwin waited tables during the day and wrote at night.

A happy meeting with Richard Wright enabled Baldwin to make progress on *In My Father's House*. A young woman who heard Baldwin read a few pages of the novel in the Village introduced him to Wright. When Baldwin visited Wright in Brooklyn in 1945, Wright asked to see what Baldwin had accomplished thus far on the novel. An excited Baldwin forwarded sixty pages to Wright, who read it within days and decided to help the aspiring young writer. Wright contacted Edward Aswell and recommended Baldwin for a Eugene F. Saxon Foundation Fellowship. That Wright was willing to enlist the aid of his own editor in securing a fellowship for Baldwin reveals the extent of the promise he saw in Baldwin's work; it also portended the bitter disappointment Wright would feel later when he thought Baldwin had betrayed him in his appraisal of *Native Son* (1940).¹¹ The \$500 Saxon Fellowship, awarded in November of 1945, boosted Baldwin's ego and enabled him to meet such literary notables as Frank S. MacGregor, president of Harper's, but it did not bring the result he had expected. When the book was re-

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jected for publication, Baldwin felt keenly that he had not lived up to Wright's expectations.

He put *In My Father's House* in a "duffel bag" and turned to another novelistic project entitled *Ignorant Armies*, based on a 1943 case involving a bisexual man who reportedly brutally killed his wife because of their sexual problems. Baldwin tried to move forward with *Ignorant Armies* just as he was confronting the suicide of his friend Eugene Worth, whom he had met in 1943 and who committed suicide in December of 1946 by jumping off the George Washington Bridge. The death was especially painful for Baldwin because he had been sexually attracted to Worth but had not expressed that desire. Baldwin's personal anguish continued as he lived for a while with the woman he planned to marry. But he broke the engagement and threw the intended wedding ring into the Hudson River near where Worth had jumped. These emotional pressures took their toll and *Ignorant Armies* floundered. (Baldwin later salvaged some of the material for inclusion in *Giovanni's Room* [1956] and *Another Country* [1962].)

Baldwin abandoned the budding novel in part because he felt the need to come to grips with his own sexual identity. His personal dilemma joined hands with his writing and social dilemmas. When he reflected on his inability to establish solidly his own sexual and racial identity, along with other problems – the increasing sexual and societal difficulties of being black in America, encounters with white policemen, prejudice, particularly in New Jersey where he had worked for a while, as well as in the Village – he bought a one-way ticket to Paris with the last of the money he had been awarded earlier in the year by the Rosenwald Foundation. On 11 November 1948, when he was twenty-four, he boarded a plane to Paris.

In Paris without resources, Baldwin worked on *Go Tell It on the Mountain* intermittently over the next four years. He developed pieces from it for publication but could not bring it speedily to conclusion. The story of John and Gabriel Grimes held such a grip on Baldwin's imagination that the novel did not suffice to exorcise it all. At intervals during the ten years of composition,

Baldwin paused to develop segments of the story and parcel them out as separate publications. A story, "The Death of the Prophet," appeared in *Commentary* in 1950; a young male character, Johnnie, tries to come to terms with his father's death. "The Rockpile" first appeared in *Going to Meet the Man* in 1965, but the repeat of characters from *Go Tell It on the Mountain* suggests that the story was written earlier. The story parallels the novel in focusing on Roy's fight and resulting injury. Gabriel and Elizabeth share features from the novel, as does John, but whereas there are two sisters, Ruth and Sarah, in the novel, and Elizabeth is pregnant again, only Delilah appears in "The Rockpile," and there is no mention of a pregnancy, though there is a baby boy named Paul. It is also clear that "The Outing" was drawn from the story Baldwin was developing in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. "The Outing," lifted from the novel when it was called *Crying Holy*, was published in *New Story* in 1951. The story focuses on a church picnic outing on a boat, to which Gabriel and Elizabeth take Roy and Johnnie, along with a younger sister Lois and an unnamed baby boy. Baldwin hints at the theme of homosexuality in the relationship between Johnnie and David Jackson, but the major focus is on the relationship between Johnnie and Gabriel, whose disapproval of his son is ever apparent. There are nuanced differences between these stories and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, but the oppressive church and the disapproving father are pervasive.¹²

By 1951, Baldwin had met Lucien Happersberger, who would become a close and intimate friend for the remainder of Baldwin's life. Baldwin left Paris and went to Happersberger's home village in Switzerland, Loèche-les-Bains, to complete the novel during the winter of 1951-52.¹³ Now calling his novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin worked for three months to complete the book, reading sections of the manuscript to Lucien in the evenings when he had finished writing and Lucien had finished painting for the day. On 26 February 1952, Baldwin mailed the manuscript to New York. When Knopf expressed interest in the novel, Baldwin flew to New York, with money borrowed from his friend Marlon Brando, to discuss recommended editorial changes. Leeming points out that William Cole, Knopf's publicity

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director, was very much in favor of publishing the novel, whereas one of the editors asked if it would not be better “without all the Jesus stuff,” a rather telling observation considering the fact that “the Jesus stuff” is the essence of the narrative.

With a \$250 advance from Knopf, and the promise of \$750 more, Baldwin remained in New York to begin rewriting sections of the book. He completed the revisions and returned the manuscript to Knopf in July of 1952. It was accepted and Baldwin received the additional \$750. He returned to Paris on 28 August 1952. The anxious waiting for publication of his first novel ended in February of 1953, when he received an advance copy of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The novel appeared in May of 1953, with an enthusiastic comment from the poet Marianne Moore, who applauded the “verisimilitude” Baldwin had achieved in his book.

The Story and Its Reception

To reviewers familiar with Baldwin’s family history, the novel may well have read as a rite of exorcism against the tyranny of the father, especially when that familial figure uses the tyranny of the church to bolster his position. The religious playing field with which Baldwin was so familiar is the territory on which young John Grimes works out his difficulties with his father Gabriel in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Set in Harlem, the novel pits the intuitive sensibility of the illegitimate John and his mother Elizabeth against the strictures of the straitlaced Gabriel. Considering himself the most righteous of the righteous but unable to realize fully his calling as a minister, Gabriel becomes a kind of “holy handyman,” pinch-hitting whenever he is needed. The novel also deals with Gabriel’s oldest son by Elizabeth (Roy), Gabriel’s sister Florence, his first wife Deborah, and his short-term mistress Esther. Other members of the Grimes family are Sarah and Ruth, John and Roy’s younger sisters; Elizabeth is pregnant with a fifth child. The story takes place on the Saturday that John turns fourteen. After a violent confrontation between Roy and Gabriel, during which Elizabeth and Florence try to intervene, the group proceeds to the Temple of the Fire Baptized,

where John, with the help of Elisha (a slightly older Sunday School teacher and the church's musician), undergoes an all-night spiritual transformation or conversion. Baldwin surrounds these rather straightforward events with flashbacks of the lives of the "saints" – Gabriel, Florence, Elizabeth. The somberness that pervades the Grimes household and relationships is the somberness of fundamentalist religious people who feel they are not entitled to enjoy this world, but who must live sternly and denyingly in order to achieve the next world. Gabriel makes decisions guaranteed to separate his children from their peers, if not to make them objects of derision. The children learn early that total parental acceptance lies only in following the path he has taken; deviation from it meets with physical punishment when they are younger and dire warnings of heavenly punishment later in life.

In contrast to the situation in Baldwin's family, his counterpart in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, young John Grimes, is unaware of the fact that he is illegitimate. Without that knowledge, he can only believe that there is something inherent in him, in his personality, that makes his father displeased with him. In making this dramatic choice, Baldwin forces John to search for ways of dealing with his father only in the relational realm instead of within a history that preceded his birth; in order to survive emotionally whole, therefore, John must outsmart his father as best he can. One of the primary conflicts in the novel thus becomes the clash between spirit and intellect, with Gabriel presumably representing the former and John growing into a representation of the latter.

In one incident in the novel, his teacher singles out a very young John for special attention. When the principal visits the classroom and asks whose work is on the blackboard, young John is silent for fear that something is wrong. When the teacher encourages him to speak up and the principal asserts, "You're a very bright boy, John Grimes . . . Keep up the good work,"¹⁴ he glimpses dimly the path by which he might escape his father. Although his father can whip his body and control his actions, things that are visible to him, he cannot control his mind. In that private place of invisible thoughts and the potential for mental

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escape from physical restraints, John uncovers the key to understanding and working through difficult situations. He initially escapes into the world of ideas – movies and fantasizing – for they are as antithetical to his father’s Bible as the world the teachers who approve of him represent.

As the novel develops, perspective of presentation is particularly important. Initially, we see Gabriel from a third person, limited point of view that follows John. Our early view of Gabriel is John’s early view, and we are equally critical. We see a hard-working and hard man, humorless, confident that he is taking care of his family and serving God in the manner the Almighty intended. He is intolerant of pleasure and insensitive to loving interactions between parents and children. Sternness pervades his personality as well as the descriptions of him. Not exactly an ogre, but close to it, Gabriel does not evoke pleasant responses from us. Anyone who controls his family so thoroughly, requires acquiescence and obedience so firmly, and seems so intent on living out the role he has designed for himself does not garner very much respect or understanding from readers.

Images that Baldwin uses in the early part of the text reinforce the pervasive darkness of personality and relationships. The Saturday morning cleaning rituals introduce the symbolic dust and grime that have choked off family relationships just as surely as they choke John as he tries to clean:

The room was narrow and dirty; nothing could alter its dimensions, no labor could make it clean. Dirt was in the walls and the floorboards. . . . Dirt was in every corner, angle, crevice of the monstrous stove, and lived behind it in delirious communion with the corrupted wall. Dirt was in the baseboard that John scrubbed every Saturday. . . . Dirt crawled in the gray mop hung out of the windows to dry. John thought with shame and horror, yet in angry hardness of heart: *He who is filthy, let him be filthy still.* . . . John hated sweeping this carpet, for dust rose, clogging his nose and sticking to his sweaty skin, and he felt that should he sweep it forever, the clouds of dust would not diminish, the rug would not be clean. . . . for each dustpan he so laboriously filled at the doorsill demons added to the rug twenty more; he saw in the expanse behind him the dust that he had raised settling again into the carpet; and he gritted his teeth, already on edge because of the dust that filled

his mouth, and nearly wept to think that so much labor brought so little reward.¹⁵

These images tie in with the family name, "Grimes," to further reinforce Baldwin's suggestion that something is dreadfully amiss in this family. The idea of Gabriel wallowing in the sins of the world, being locked into the very grime from which he believed himself immune, inserts the first of many ironic contrasts into the text. Traditional connotations of color imagery associated with grime and dirt also evoke blackness, a blackness that Christians usually identify with sin and Satan, thereby capturing two concepts simultaneously. First, Christians generally believe that those who are "born again" have been purified, washed in the blood of the Lamb. Their souls have been made "as white" as snow. To "backslide" from this position, then, is to have one's soul "blackened" by sin. Second, the imagery captures the idea of Satan roasting souls in the fires of hell, with their imagined blackened, sooty, ashy look (though never decomposed bodies). Darkness and grime are generally identified with Satan (in spite of the redness of the fire with which one's soul may burn), and hell is generally conceived of as a dark, preternaturally gloomy place.¹⁶

Although sin is a dominant theme in the novel, clearly some characters sin more than others, and Baldwin encourages readers to respond to different sins with different degrees of understanding or sympathy. Elizabeth's "sin" of having given birth to John out of wedlock is infinitely less significant than Gabriel's sin of having impregnated and abandoned Esther, who gave birth to Royal, Gabriel's first son. Florence's "sin" of leaving her mother on her deathbed to find a better life in New York is ultimately more forgivable than Gabriel's "sin" of holding John and Elizabeth perennially responsible for what he considers her "fall." We might even argue that, although the white men rape Deborah, Gabriel does an equal amount of – if not more – psychological damage to her, and over a much longer period of time. Believing himself finally free of sin, Gabriel does more damage than any other character in the novel.

Yet, as unlikable as Gabriel may be, perhaps it is only fair to

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view the circumstances from his perspective as well. Baldwin provides that opportunity in "Gabriel's Prayer," the section of the novel that begins part two, "The Prayers of the Saints." Gabriel was a sinner for so long in his drunkenness and whoring that it is perhaps not unexpected that, once he embraced conversion, he would embrace it in the extreme. He becomes the most righteous of the righteous, the purest of the pure, thereby running the risk of passing judgment on others who do not abide by the same standards by which he measures himself. The *good* thing in this process is that Gabriel does make a change; he finds the strength and the imagination to realize that the self-destructive path he is on is not a viable one, and he takes up another course.

The fervor with which he defends Deborah at the banquet of the twenty-four elders might also be a mark in his favor. He looks very tolerant in a group of fat preachers too satisfied with their own superiority from the masses. Gabriel is still new enough in his faith to challenge their lapses. The warmth with which he initially pursues Deborah might also be another mark in his favor; that is tainted somewhat, however, by his motivation for pursuing her. He sees himself in the role of elevating a fallen woman, which means that he has put pride before love, his self-assigned ability to rescue before any clear-sighted evaluation of the sexual or physical attractiveness of the woman as woman. Deborah becomes a cause, an opportunity to act out a biblical text, instead of a real life human being.

Acting out the biblical text also guides Gabriel in "romancing" Elizabeth. Here is another woman fallen by virtue of sexual violation, so Gabriel plans to lift her. To his credit, he is wonderfully loving of and attentive to both Elizabeth and John in the early stages of the courtship. As Elizabeth recounts, he was the best possible surrogate father she could have imagined for John. Unhesitant in playing the role of uplifter, Gabriel changes only when he senses in Elizabeth that she is perhaps not so appreciative of the "rescue" as he had anticipated. As John grows up, Gabriel directs a portion of that dissatisfaction with Elizabeth onto John, partly because he recognizes that this illegitimate heir is better able to live up to his expectations of a royal son than

either the dead Royal or the living Roy. This rankles his pride, that oversized, self-imposed directive that guides his life.

Still, to his credit, Gabriel does provide a home for Elizabeth, and as he proceeds to expand his family, he is a good provider in the sense that he pays the bills and puts food on the table. If this were the only measure by which human relationships were to be judged, or by which men are judged to be good, then Gabriel would pass with flying colors. Unfortunately, such a superficial veneer leaves too much of the intricacy of human life uncovered, and in those areas Gabriel falls short. Nonetheless, readers can still identify with the desire of a man to follow directives in which he believes and to have a son to follow in his footsteps. Those desires are just as American as they are religious, for pulling oneself up “by the bootstraps” and acquiring a comfortable house in the suburbs, with a proper nuclear family in it, has been an essential part of the American Dream for decades.

For all this understanding, however, more sympathy usually accrues to the women and John than to Gabriel. His inability to offer emotional sustenance and nurturing places him into a category of acceptance secondary to John and Elizabeth, both of whose artistic and intellectual senses opt for life instead of living death. Through Richard, John’s biological father, Elizabeth had been exposed to the world of books and museums. Her final, most poignant memory of Richard is of him reading a book. Florence, for all her shortcomings as a daughter, is nonetheless altruistic toward Elizabeth and the illegitimate John and tries over the years – often unsuccessfully – to protect them from Gabriel’s wrath. Florence’s desire to live out a romantic dream by going to New York is an understandable one, and readers do not generally see her bowing before the altar at the tarry service as the deserved punishment of being “brought low” into which Gabriel casts it. Deborah and Esther, both of whom have been used by Gabriel, earn sympathetic responses from readers, one for the long-suffering she endures over a long barren life and the other for the intense suffering that brings her short life to a painful end.

John acquired his artistic and intellectual senses from Elizabeth and from his dead father Richard. John has learned that his

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intellect can capture the attention of the school principal and he explores the libraries throughout Harlem. He is akin to the young Baldwin, who, the author recounts in many places, grew up holding a book in one hand and the newest Baldwin baby in the other. The life of the mind can help him transcend his father calling him “ugly” and saying that he has “the face of Satan,” and to cope with his general hostility toward him. John’s story of growing up, of learning to deal with his father’s tyranny, therefore, is one that endeared many readers to *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

Numerous reviewers around the country gave their attention to the novel when it initially appeared; they responded in outlets ranging geographically from New York to the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and philosophically from the *Christian Science Monitor* to the *New Yorker* and *Catholic World*. Most reviewers responded warmly to the story of the Grimes family and John’s quest for a spiritual as well as a secular father. They recognized, first and foremost, the linguistic quality and evocative power of Baldwin’s writing. J. Saunders Redding, a seasoned writer and critic, wrote in the *New York Herald-Tribune Book Review*: “Baldwin’s style is lucid and free-running but involved. It is a style that shows the man to be keenly sensitive to words.”¹⁷ The reviewer for *The Nation* called the novel “mature” and “skillful,” agreeing with the evaluation of “skillful” that John Henry Raleigh offered in the *New Republic*. Raleigh also praised Baldwin “for a style rich in metaphor and in a sad eloquence.” Implicit in most reviews, but explicit in the one in *Time*, was an appreciation of the church basis for Baldwin’s impressive style; *Time*’s reviewer observed that Baldwin “sometimes writes with the powerful rocking rhythms of a storefront-church meeting.”

Raleigh also joined other reviewers in commenting on the effective use of flashbacks (“skilful time-shift”) in the novel. Harvey Curtis Webster observed in *Saturday Review*: “Mr. Baldwin’s first novel is written as skilfully as many a man’s fifth essay in fiction. His handling of flashbacks so that they show the past without interrupting the drama of the present is masterful.” African-American scholar Richard K. Barksdale, writing in *Phylon*, joined Webster and Raleigh in appreciation of Baldwin’s

“superbly articulated flashbacks.” Barksdale’s general conclusion was that Baldwin had “written a very fine first novel.”

Several reviewers, among them Redding and the reviewer for *Saturday Review*, recognized the influence on Baldwin of Dostoevsky, Faulkner, and other writers. Ralph Ellison, perhaps because of the publication of *Invisible Man* just the year before *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, appears as the consistent point of departure for evaluating Baldwin’s achievement. The *New Yorker* reviewer, one of the few voices of objection to anything in Baldwin’s novel, used Ellison as the standard against which he found Baldwin lacking. The reviewer judged Baldwin’s “perfections” to be “wooden” and “without vitality,” compared to Ellison’s work, in spite of the novel’s realism. He seemed to locate his criticism in the fact that *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, unlike *Invisible Man* and Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, is “humorless.” “Mr. Baldwin’s God-intoxicated lecher, with his roving eye and his inflamed conscience, which always arrives on the scene too late, carries farce with him wherever he goes, and if one treats him with Kafkaesque solemnity, the life goes out of him and the spiritual tragedy of his congregation loses a dimension.” This voice of dissent almost sounds whiny in the context of all the wonderful praise heaped on Baldwin’s first novelistic effort; but even this reviewer recognized the “quite exceptional promise” that Baldwin showed in the novel. The only other negative reaction came from Langston Hughes, by this time a well-known writer in his own right. Although Hughes sent a supportive comment when Knopf requested it for the novel, in a letter to Arna Bontemps he voiced his personal doubts about Baldwin’s achievement. Hughes criticized *Go Tell It on the Mountain* for not having been written by Zora Neale Hurston, who could have used “her feeling for the folk idiom” to make it “a quite wonderful book.” Instead, he observed, Baldwin “overwrites and over-poeticizes in images way over the heads of the folks supposedly thinking them.” His final conclusion was that *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was “a low-down story in a velvet bag – and a Knopf binding.”¹⁸

Baldwin wrote of the novel that his intention was to focus on people who happened to be Negroes, not exclusively on Negroes.

Introduction

He asserted that the novel "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."¹⁹ Reviewers such as Redding accepted that evaluation but others – those writing for *The Commonwealth*, *Time*, and the *New Republic* – clearly did not consider Baldwin the best authority on his accomplishment in the novel as it related to the issue of "Negroes" versus "people." Redding observed of John Grimes that "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, estranged by younger children from his mother, and forced to live within himself." By contrast, T. E. Cassidy in *The Commonwealth* maintained that Baldwin had "not really accomplished" his objective of minimizing race, "because there is always the absolute feeling of injustice toward a people, not just as people, but as a race of people. The disasters that occur are those that occur only, or largely, because these are Negro people." The reviewer for *Time* rejected Baldwin's claim out of hand: "People they certainly are, but so movingly and intensely Negro that any reader listening to them with the compassion Baldwin evokes will overlook his cliché."

The theme of suffering in the novel drew commentary from reviewers almost as consistently as Gabriel's destructive character. The consequences of sin and of racial oppression were the twin prongs causing that suffering. John's plight within this larger context earned John the support of almost all reviewers. Baldwin succeeded in drawing effectively the dilemma of an intelligent young man, on the verge of sexual and spiritual awakening, who cannot trust the person who should be his guide through both these processes.

The Thematic Tradition

In its treatment of the influence of black fundamentalist religious traditions on African-American literature, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* shares kinship with literary works that preceded it and anticipates others that follow it. As Richard K. Barksdale and Keneth