

Making It Happen

James Baldwin, the American black writer and activist, died on December 1, in Provence, France, aged 63. The contradictory, partial assessment of his cultural and political importance that his death elicited in the British press is emblematic of this society's unease with the concept of the imaginative writer as



Baldwin: Lyrical and political

political figure, affecting and changing his historical moment.

W J Weatherby in *The Guardian* saw Baldwin, born in the Harlem ghetto, as 'lucky' to come of age in time to ride 'the wave of the civil rights movement' where he found a 'popular following'. Weatherby also talks of Baldwin's political activities as 'draining' energy from his real task as a novelist.

But Baldwin did not ride that moment; he helped to make it. His political commitment was at the centre of his fiction. *The Fire Next Time* (1962) was one of the most strategically important popular political pieces in American history - on a par with Tom Paine's *Common Sense*. For Baldwin prophetically addressed the collective and individual experi-

ence of American racism in relation to its probable and inevitable consequence in resistance and revolt.

He was throughout his life a superb polemical writer who made his readers understand not only *that* but *how* the personal was political. His essays moved between and broke down the supposed divisions between public and private arenas. No obituary or memoir appearing in the week after his death was willing to discuss seriously his status as a homosexual writer, or to point out that sexual politics was also at the heart of his fictional project.

His courageous, transforming explorations of sexual relationships and sexual orientation in works like *Giovanni's Room* (1957) and *Another Country* (1963) gave new political dimensions to those questions. In striking contrast to most major male foreign novelists of the post-war period, whose work was characterised by an unreflecting misogyny, Baldwin sought from his earliest piece of fiction, *Go Tell It On The Mountain* (1954), to understand and criticise the historical construction of authoritarian masculinities in black and white society.

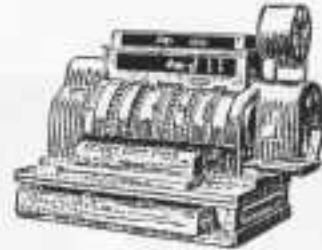
His writing opened up a space for those issues to be discussed as political questions, prefiguring perhaps the fictional terrain that would be taken up by black feminist writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison.

Both as novelist and political essayist his rhetorical skills combined a lucid, lyrical energy with a devastatingly precise ability to make vivid the subjective and social meaning of an event. His last book on the Atlanta murders, *Evidence Of Things Seen* (1986), took him back to the American South and had a personal and historical element, which insisted that the reader understood the exact complex and contradictory place from which he was speaking.

Baldwin was one of the great writers in English whose understanding of our culture we have yet to take in or take on. •
Cora Kaplan

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