

Rosenbach Museum

Learning from James Baldwin, with Kathryn “Kitsi” Watterson

Tuesdays, beginning September 24, 2019

Course description:

James Baldwin, one of the leading writers of the 20th century, portrayed passionate truths about poverty, racism, religion, homophobia, and the struggle for justice in America.. “[He] is one of those rare figures in literature and history, a man who was truly engaged in all the issues of his time,” says author Thulani Davis. “He was prescient, fierce, elegant...” Baldwin’s life as a writer continues to inspire other writers, including Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, Henry Louis Gates, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Thulani Davis, Caryl Phillips, and Jesmyn Ward, to name just a few.

Over the next five months, we will read and discuss a number of Baldwin’s powerful novels, short stories, and essays and watch clips of his talks, the documentary, “I Am Not Your Negro,” and the movie based on his novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*. We will absorb the ether of Baldwin’s life—Pentecostalism, the impact of discrimination, black artists exiled in Paris, the Civil Rights Movement, and Baldwin’s return to America—and see how his searing depictions of the realities forged in slavery and misogyny, Jim Crow laws, and lynching provide an education for understanding their legacies, as well as the urgent need for love and freedom in today’s world.

Readings:

Books:

***Go Tell It On the Mountain*, by James Baldwin. New York: Knopf, 1953**

***The Fire Next Time*, by James Baldwin. New York: Dial Press, 1963, Vintage, 1963**

***Another Country*, by James Baldwin, New York: Vintage, 1962**

***Giovanni’s Room*, by James Baldwin. New York: Dial Press, 1956**

***If Beale Street Could Talk*, by James Baldwin. New York: Michael Joseph, 1974.**

“Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death—ought to decide, indeed, to earn one’s death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life.

“One is responsible to life: It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return. One must negotiate this passage as nobly as possible, for the sake of those who are coming after us. But white Americans do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them...

“It is the responsibility of free men to trust and to celebrate what is constant—birth, struggle, and death are constant, and so is love, though we may not always think so—and to apprehend the nature of change, to be able and willing to change. I speak of change not on the surface but in the depths—change in the sense of renewal.

*--James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time**

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“From my point of view -- no label, no slogan, no party, no skin color, and indeed, no religion is more important than the human being.”
--James Baldwin

Week One: Tuesday, September 24—Racism, Jim Crow, and the Legacies of Slavery

READINGS:

- Introductions to each other and to James Baldwin’s work
- ***Go Tell It On the Mountain***, by James Baldwin
- “Sonny’s Blues,” (short story) by James Baldwin

Supplemental:

- “The Uses of the Blues,” by James Baldwin
- [The Paris Review - James Baldwin, The Art of Fiction No. 78](http://www.theparisreview.org/.../james-baldwin-the-art-of-fiction-no-78-james-bald...)

<https://www.theparisreview.org/.../james-baldwin-the-art-of-fiction-no-78-james-bald...>

Week Two: Tuesday, October 22— Baldwin, Identity, Homosexuality & Bisexuality

READINGS:

GIOVANNI’S ROOM by James Baldwin

Supplemental:

- “Stranger in the Village,” by James Baldwin
- “Equal in Paris,” by James Baldwin
- “The Discovery of What It Means to be An American,” by James Baldwin
- “Giovanni’s Room,” in *James Baldwin: A Biography*, by David Leeming

Week Three: Tuesday, November 19: Baldwin’s Vision of Love and Possibility

READINGS:

THE FIRE NEXT TIME, by James Baldwin

- “Going to Meet the Man,” by James Baldwin
- “Where is the Voice Coming From?” by Eudora Welty

Supplemental:

- “The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King,” by James Baldwin
 - “A Call for Unity,” Public Statement by Eight Alabama Clergymen
 - https://www.massresistance.org/docs/gen/09a/mlk_day/statement.html
 - “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
 - “Without Sanctuary, Lynching Photography...” “Hellhounds” by Leon F. Litvack
 - “Letter to My Son” by Ta-Nehisi Coates
- <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/>

Week Four: Tuesday, December 17th: Whiteness, Racism, & “The White Problem”

READINGS DUE:

ANOTHER COUNTRY, by James Baldwin

Supplemental:

- “A Fly in Buttermilk,” in *Nobody Knows My Name*
- “Notes of a Native Son,” by James Baldwin
- “Color” by James Baldwin
- Excerpt: *The Devil Finds Work*, by James Baldwin, (NY, Dial, 1976, Vintage 2011)

Week Five: TUESDAY, Jan. 21, 2020: Shattering Assumptions, A Thunderous Battle Cry
READINGS DUE:

- ***IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK*, by James Baldwin**

Supplemental:

- “If Beale Street Could Talk,” 2018 movie
- “The Day I Finally Met Baldwin,” by Chinua Achebe (in the “Grand Tour”)
- “An Interview with James Baldwin,” Interview by Studs Terkel

“Most of us are about as eager to be changed as we were to be born, and go through our changes in a similar state of shock.” ---James Baldwin

“I do not know many Negroes who are eager to be ‘accepted’ by white people, still less to be loved by them; they, the blacks, simply don’t want to be beaten over the head by the whites every instant of our brief passage on this planet. White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this -- which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never -- the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.”

*--James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time**

“[It was a conversation that]has not ended and will not end as long as you and I shall live. For the terms of existence, is, after all, the Baldwin subject. It informs a hundred and twenty-four book reviews, seven works of nonfiction, two plays, a collection of stories, six novels, one scenario, and a collection of poems. His terms for existence. Of his own growth to maturity James Baldwin has said, ‘I was at war with, was completely unable to accept the assumptions of, the official vocabulary into which I had been born. Which assumptions, it had been supposed, would guide my life and keep me in my place.’

“Baldwin’s central project throughout his writing career was to shatter that official vocabulary, and in doing so he claims an ancestral role in the formation of contemporary literary and social theory and pedagogy that drives the academy today....

“In Notes of a Native Son, [Baldwin] said, ‘...I think all theories are suspect, that the finest principles may have to be modified, or even be pulverized by the demands of life, and that one must find, therefore, one’s own moral center, and move through the world hoping that this center will guide one aright.” From this moral center he located and unmasked traditional attitudes or, in his words, ‘theologies that deny one life.’ ‘For,’ he said, ‘the basis of the vocabulary into which we were born is that white Christians, aided perhaps by a few Jews, are the authors and custodians of civilization and history. A delusion validated only by the action and reality of white power. Now that that power is being contested, the moral basis of our vocabulary is being revealed, and it is not an ennobling sight. The gates of our cities are barred, and famine, danger and death are the ruling citizens. It is time to re-examine the principles of the vocabulary which has led us to the place.’

“From Notes of a Native Son to his final novel, Just Above My Head,” [Baldwin] warns us that what the world calls morality is nothing but the dream of safety. But for Baldwin, the only safety is to dare love. Love is the term for existence that he left us. It remains a challenge for the academy, and for our lives.”

*--Eleanor Traylor, “On Solid Ground,” in James Baldwin’s *Grand Tour**

Instructor Bio:

Kathryn "Kitsi" Watterson is an award-winning writer and journalist whose works include the ground-breaking *Women in Prison* (Doubleday, 1973; Northeastern University Press, 1996) which led to an ABC "Close Up" documentary, the founding of prisoner support organizations across the country, and ongoing scholarly study. Her nonfiction includes *Not by the Sword*, which won a 1996 Christopher Award and inspired a play and opera, and *You Must Be Dreaming* (co-author), which exposes a world-famous psychiatrist who systemically drugged and sexually assaulted his patients. This *New York Times* Notable Book, a NBC movie "Betrayal of Trust," is still studied and excerpted.

Her most recent book, *I Hear My People Singing: Voices of African-American Princeton*, (Princeton University Press, 2017), with a forward by Cornel West, is a microcosm of American history. It takes us into the first-person stories of slavery, segregation, and racial injustice in the North. Residents who grew up in the Jim Crow town of Princeton, NJ, shine light into the inner spirit and ingenuity of a people who actively worked to bring down the barriers erected to bar their progress. They built institutions, strategies and organizations to protect, heal, and enrich the lives of their children and each other. As one reviewer wrote: "Reading this book is not an intellectual exercise. It takes us into the human experience. The power of the individual opens our eyes and hearts to other people's lives and becomes woven into our own."

Watterson's short stories and essays have been published in *TriQuarterly*, *Writers' Forum*, *Northeast Corridor*, *Santa Monica Review*, and *Fourth Genre*. She has written for *The New York Times*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, and *The International Herald Tribune*, among others.

At the University of Pennsylvania, Kitsi Watterson teaches fiction and non-fiction in the Creative Writing Program to undergraduate and graduate students. She's hosted events at Kelly Writers' House that include "One Hundred Thousand Poets for Change," a film project of PEN and the ACLU, "Reckoning with Torture," and an event honoring the friendship of James Baldwin and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She sings, drums, and facilitates workshops with TheUnity, a popular musical trio that creates improvisational, soulful, and jazzy music-in-the-making, with voices raised in songs and stories. Currently she is at work on a memoir set in the early 1970s and a collection of short stories.