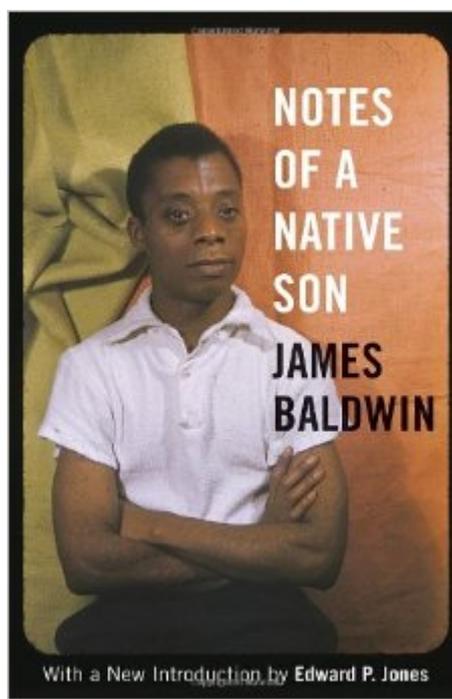


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Notes Of A Native Son



Synopsis

A new edition of the book many have called James Baldwin's most influential work. Written during the 1940s and early 1950s, when Baldwin was only in his twenties, the essays collected in *Notes of a Native Son* capture a view of black life and black thought at the dawn of the civil rights movement and as the movement slowly gained strength through the words of one of the most captivating essayists and foremost intellectuals of that era. Writing as an artist, activist, and social critic, Baldwin probes the complex condition of being black in America. With a keen eye, he examines everything from the significance of the protest novel to the motives and circumstances of the many black expatriates of the time, from his home in "The Harlem Ghetto" to a sobering "Journey to Atlanta." *Notes of a Native Son* inaugurated Baldwin as one of the leading interpreters of the dramatic social changes erupting in the United States in the twentieth century, and many of his observations have proven almost prophetic. His criticism on topics such as the paternalism of white progressives or on his own friend Richard Wright's work is pointed and unabashed. He was also one of the few writing on race at the time who addressed the issue with a powerful mixture of outrage at the gross physical and political violence against black citizens and measured understanding of their oppressors, which helped awaken a white audience to the injustices under their noses. Naturally, this combination of brazen criticism and unconventional empathy for white readers won Baldwin as much condemnation as praise. *Notes* is the book that established Baldwin's voice as a social critic, and it remains one of his most admired works. The essays collected here create a cohesive sketch of black America and reveal an intimate portrait of Baldwin's own search for identity as an artist, as a black man, and as an American.

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Customer Reviews

The ten essays in this collection were originally published in *Commentary*, *Partisan Review*, *Harper's*, and other national periodicals during the late 1940s and early 1950s; Baldwin revised a few essays, arranged them by theme, and added "Autobiographical Notes" as a preface. They are among the most compelling, insightful pieces ever written on what it means to be an American and, in particular, what means to be a black American. "The story of the Negro in America is the story of America," Baldwin writes, "or, more precisely, it is the story of Americans. It is not a pretty story: the story of a people is never very pretty." "Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Many Thousands Gone" both discuss the portrayal of blacks in American fiction (beginning with "Uncle Tom's Cabin") and contain harsh criticism of Richard Wright's "Native Son"--comments which permanently ended their tempestuous friendship. Baldwin next directs his ire (and wit) at the ridiculous stereotypes in the all-black film "Carmen Jones." These are not mere reviews, however; the strength of these three essays is Baldwin's ability to offer general comments about societal matters based on a few examples. The second essay is particularly noteworthy because Baldwin writes as if he, like most of his readers, were white. This technique allow him to imply that, on the one hand, as a native-born American, he can easily comprehend the view of the "dominant" culture, yet, on the other hand, the black experience is something white Americans will never understand--that the majority assumption is "that the black man, to become truly human and acceptable, must first become like us." The next three essays offer social commentary. "The Harlem Ghetto" describes life in Baldwin's neighborhood, examines the importance of the Negro press, and (undoubtedly with the readers of *Commentary* in mind) focuses especially on the ongoing tensions between Jews and blacks. In "Journey to Atlanta," Baldwin tells how his brother's church quartet was sent by the Progressive Party to Atlanta, ostensibly to sing at church events, but inevitably as free labor for canvassing activities--with no pay, poor lodging, and substandard food. In the end, the four young men were left to fend for themselves, struggling to earn money for their tickets back to New York. The final essay, "Notes of a Native Son," is a poignant eulogy for Baldwin's stepfather, including a hair-raising account of Baldwin's near-suicidal attempt to rebel against Jim Crow rules in New Jersey. Baldwin's life in Europe takes up the last section. The first three essays describe the "social limbo" that greets Americans--white and black--in Paris and the "invisibility" of American blacks there; it includes the horrifying account of Baldwin's arrest and imprisonment for a hotel bedsheet stolen by an

acquaintance. The final essay ends the collection on a humorous, sometimes touching, and ultimately contemplative note: what it's like to be not simply the only black man living in a Swiss resort but the only black man most of the villagers have ever seen. Baldwin realizes that "no road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where white men still have the luxury of looking at me as a stranger." What's astonishing about these essays is the balance between Baldwin's justified rage and his ability to laugh at the world--and at himself. Many of the essays resemble short stories in their structure and tension and humor, and Baldwin's writing is just as strong when he's angry as when he's lighthearted. Most important, none of these essays have dated in any significant way, and they still offer stirring insights on race and society in America.

The title essay in Baldwin's important collection has been one of those pieces of writing that has been personally important throughout my personal and professional life. Baldwin combines his first experiences of racism with his memories of his strained relationship to his bitter father. The encounter with racism in a New Jersey restaurant where he is refused service leads Baldwin to a better understanding of his father's pain and his attempts to overcome his own. The essay is beautifully written, artfully combining and complicating the different themes. I've used it regularly in my teaching, and regard it as one of the best pieces of twentieth-century American prose. While I'm not African American, the writing allows me at least partly to enter Baldwin's feelings about race. Equally moving for me, and I suspect for many readers, is the description of Baldwin's strained relationship to and eventual compassion for his father, and his attempts to overcome his own frustration and anger. This deeply honest and articulate essay and book is a must for anyone concerned with modern American writing and also seeking a deeper understanding of his or her own inner complexities.

This is an absolutely wonderful book of essays about growing up, making a career, and being black in the US in the 1950-60s. Just the chapter on his step-father - an angry, brilliant, difficult man - is worth the price of admission. Beyond the black experience, everyone who has fought with a tough dad will empathise with Baldwin. Then there is a piece on living in France as a young writer, again it is unbelievably dense, funny, and moving, a true masterpiece of the genre of autobiographical essays. His style is so cool and clear, so icily brilliant, that any aspiring writer can study the style, as did I. This book, in my opinion, has Baldwin's best work in it, of a quality that earns him a place in the literary canon. The essays really are far far better than any of his novels, in my opinion. While some of them are less than excellent journalistic pieces (A Fly in the Buttermilk about school integration),

the best ones are, well, the best. Warmly recommended.

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