A Letter to My Nephew

by James Baldwin
December 1, 1962

James Baldwin's thoughts on his nephew's future—in a country with a terrible history of racism—first appeared in The Progressive magazine in 1962. Over 50 years later his words are, sadly, more relevant than ever.

Dear James:

I have begun this letter five times and torn it up five times. I keep seeing your face, which is also the face of your father and my brother. I have known both of you all your lives and have carried your daddy in my arms and on my shoulders, kissed him and spanked him and watched him learn to walk. I don't know if you have known anybody from that far back, if you have loved anybody that long, first as an infant, then as a child, then as a man. You gain a strange perspective on time and human pain and effort.

Other people cannot see what I see whenever I look into your father's face, for behind your father's face as it is today are all those other faces which were his. Let him laugh and I see a cellar your father does not remember and a house he does not remember and I hear in his present laughter his laughter as a child. Let him curse and I remember his falling down the cellar steps and howling and I remember with pain his tears which my hand or your grandmother's hand so easily wiped away, but no one's hand can wipe away those tears he sheds invisibly today which one hears in his laughter and in his speech and in his songs.

I know what the world has done to my brother and how narrowly he has survived it and I know, which is much worse, and this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it. One can be--indeed, one must strive to become--tough and
philosophical concerning destruction and death, for this is what most of mankind has been
best at since we have heard of war; remember, I said most of mankind, but it is not
permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence
which constitutes the crime.

Now, my dear namesake, these innocent and well-meaning people, your countrymen, have
caused you to be born under conditions not far removed from those described for us by
Charles Dickens in the London of more than a hundred years ago. I hear the chorus of the
innocents screaming, "No, this is not true. How bitter you are," but I am writing this letter
to you to try to tell you something about how to handle them, for most of them do not yet
really know that you exist. I know the conditions under which you were born for I was
there. Your countrymen were not there and haven't made it yet. Your grandmother was
also there and no one has ever accused her of being bitter. I suggest that the innocent check
with her. She isn't hard to find. Your countrymen don't know that she exists either, though
she has been working for them all their lives.

You don't be afraid. I said it was intended that you should perish, in the ghetto, perish by
never being allowed to go beyond and behind the white man's definition, by never being
allowed to spell your proper name. You have, and many of us have, defeated this intention
and by a terrible law, a terrible paradox, those innocents who believed that your
imprisonment made them safe are losing their grasp of reality. But these men are your
brothers, your lost younger brothers, and if the word "integration" means anything, this is
what it means, that we with love shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to
cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it, for this is your home, my friend. Do not be
driven from it. Great men have done great things here and will again and we can make
America what America must become.

It will be hard, James, but you come from sturdy peasant stock, men who picked cotton,
dammed rivers, built railroads, and in the teeth of the most terrifying odds, achieved an
unassailable and monumental dignity. You come from a long line of great poets, some of the greatest poets since Homer. One of them said, "The very time I thought I was lost, my dungeon shook and my chains fell off."

You know and I know that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too early. We cannot be free until they are free. God bless you, James, and Godspeed.

Your uncle,

James

From Wikipedia:

James Arthur Baldwin (August 2, 1924 – December 1, 1987) was an American novelist, playwright, essayist, poet, and activist. His essays, collected in Notes of a Native Son (1955), explore intricacies of racial, sexual, and class distinctions in the Western society of the United States during the mid twentieth-century. Some of Baldwin's essays are book-length, including The Fire Next Time (1963), No Name in the Street (1972), and The Devil Finds Work (1976). An unfinished manuscript, Remember This House, was expanded and adapted for cinema as the Academy Award–nominated documentary film I Am Not Your Negro (2016). One of his novels, If Beale Street Could Talk, was adapted into the Academy-Award-winning film of the same name in 2018, directed and produced by Barry Jenkins.

Baldwin's novels, short stories, and plays fictionalize fundamental personal questions and dilemmas amid complex social and psychological pressures. Themes of masculinity, sexuality, race, and class intertwine to create intricate narratives that run parallel with some of the major political movements toward social change in mid-twentieth-century America, such as the civil rights movement and the gay liberation movement.
Baldwin in 1969

Born
August 2, 1924
New York City, New York, U.S.

Died
December 1, 1987 (aged 63)
Saint-Paul-de-Vence, Alpes-Maritimes, France

Resting place
Ferncliff Cemetery, Westchester County, New York

Occupation
• novelist
• playwright
• activist

Language
English

Nationality
United States of America

Education
DeWitt Clinton High School

Genre
• Urban fiction
• African-American literature
• Gay literature

Notable works
• Go Tell It on the Mountain
• Giovanni's Room
• Notes of a Native Son

Years active
1947–1985
**Gilead by Marilynne Robinson**

**SETTING:** 1956, Gilead, a small town in Iowa.
- “a place John Brown and Jim Lane could fall back on when they needed to heal and rest.”
  - **John H. Brown** (May 9, 1800 – December 2, 1859) was an American abolitionist leader. Brown felt that violence was necessary to end American slavery, as years of speeches, sermons, petitions, and moral persuasion had failed. An intensely religious man, Brown believed he was raised up by God to strike the death blow to American slavery. In October 1859, Brown led a raid on the federal armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (today West Virginia), intending to start a slave liberation movement that would spread south. Precursor of the Civil War.
    - Intensely religious – “I am God’s instrument.”
    - Jim Lane – militia leader, senator from Kansas
  - **Bleeding Kansas:** Brown first gained national attention when he led anti-slavery volunteers during the Bleeding Kansas crisis of the late 1850s, a state-level civil war over whether Kansas would enter the Union as a slave state or a free state. He was dissatisfied with abolitionist pacifism: "These men are all talk. What we need is action—action!"
- Iowa: “the shining star of radicalism”
- Has no **miscegenation laws:**
  - Starting in the late 1600s, miscegenation laws — which banned black people and, in some cases, other non-white groups from marrying or having sex with white people — were put into effect in slave-holding colonies like Virginia and Maryland, where the law directly addressed white women, who "forgetful of their free condition and to the disgrace of our Nation do intermarry with Negro slaves.”
- **TIME:** Late spring through early fall, 1956

**CHARACTERS:**
- **Narrator:** Rev. John Ames III, age 76 when story begins. Dying of heart disease,
  - Born in Kansas in 1880, moved to Gilead when he was 2.
  - Congregational minister, like his father and grandfather before him.
Married his 1st wife, Louisa, his last year of seminary. She died in childbirth. Daughter, Angeline, dies shortly thereafter, looking into his eyes.

Widowed at 25, narrator remarries at age 67 to a 32-year old woman, Lila. She is now 41. She has no family, but a “sad, mysterious past.”

They have one child, a boy (nameless) who is 6 years old. The book/letter is addressed to him.

- **John Ames Jr., narrator’s father:**
  - 5 children, of which only the eldest (Edward) and the youngest (John Ames III, narrator) survived.
    - **Edward** (narrator’s brother) is 10 years older, studied in Germany and teaches at a college in Kansas. Raised in the church but now an atheist.
  - Holds more moderate views than his own father (narrator’s grandfather). Is a pacifist – in stark contrast to his father (narrator’s grandfather)
  - Narrator’s father and mother moved away from Gilead. Both are deceased.

- **John Ames Sr., narrators grandfather**
  - Eccentric and radical – an acquaintance of John Brown.
  - In the 1830s, at age 16 growing up in Maine, has a vision of Christ in chains like a slave.
  - Participates in violent conflict between pro- and anti-slavery sides in Kansas in the 1850s.
  - Although nominally too old, enlisted in the Union army as a chaplain and lost an eye in the battle of Wilson’s Creek in Missouri in 1861.
  - After the war, moved from Kansas to Iowa where he was one of the founders of the town of Gilead.
  - Became more radical as he aged: “preached” local boys into WWI, then had to minister to all the widows afterward.
  - After conflict with his son (the narrator’s father), the narrator’s grandfather leaves Iowa to return to Kansas.
  - Narrator’s Father takes the narrator as a young boy on a pilgrimage there to find the grave of the narrator’s grandfather.

- **Robert Boughton (“Old Boughton”)**
  - Narrator’s best friend since childhood, now a “staunch Presbyterian minister”.
  - Also lives in Gilead, with 8 kids. Wife is now deceased & he is frail.
- Narrator was always jealous of Old Boughton's family.
- Narrator frequently visits him to discuss theology and life.
- Boughton’s daughter, Glory, has now returned to care for him.
  - Boughton’s son Jack has returned, too.

- **Jack Boughton**
  - Old Boughton’s son. Named after the narrator (John Ames Boughton).
  - A prodigal with a rebellious past, but most beloved of Boughton’s children.
  - Brought shame on the Boughton family when, as a young man, got a young, poor country girl pregnant and refused to marry her.
  - Their daughter died at age 3, and the mother left for Chicago.
  - Now 43, Jack returns to Gilead, older and sad.

- **Bud Fowler** – see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bud_Fowler](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bud_Fowler)
  - John W. "Bud" Fowler (March 16, 1858 – February 26, 1913) was an American baseball player, manager, and club organizer. He is the earliest known African-American player in organized professional baseball; that is, the major leagues and minor leagues. His father had escaped from slavery and migrated to New York. In 1859, his family moved from Fort Plain, New York, to Cooperstown. He learned to play baseball during his youth in Cooperstown.
  - Fowler first played for an all-white professional team based out of New Castle, Pennsylvania in 1872, when he was 14 years old.[2]
  - Largely supporting himself as a barber, Fowler continued to play for baseball teams in New England and Canada for the next four years. He then moved to the Midwest. In 1883, Fowler played for a team in Niles, Ohio; in 1884, he played for Stillwater, Minnesota, in the Northwestern League.
  - Keokuk
Fowler (top row, center) with the Keokuk, Iowa team of the Western League in 1885

- Keokuk, Iowa had not had a professional baseball team since 1875. However, in 1885, local businessman R. W. "Nick" Curtis was the chief force behind starting a new team and hired Fowler for it. Johnny Peters, the manager of the then-disbanded Stillwater, Minnesota team, helped Fowler get connected with the new team in Keokuk, the Keokuk Hawkeyes.

- Fowler became the most popular player on the Keokuk team. The local newspaper, the Keokuk Gate City and Constitution, described him as "a good ball player, a hard worker, a genius on the ball field, intelligent, gentlemanly in his conduct and deserving of the good opinion entertained for him by base ball admirers here." Fowler also commented to the local newspaper on issues with the "reserve clause," the contractual mechanism that allowed teams to hold on to players for their entire career. Fowler stated that "when a ball player signs a league contract they can do anything with him under its provisions but hang him."

- The Western League folded that season due to financial reasons, leaving Keokuk without a league, and Fowler was released.

Questions to consider:

1. What has been your experience of the novel so far?
   a. What is the narrator’s goal in writing this?
2. Clearly, this is not a typical novel, driven by plot with distinct episodes.
   a. What is the effect of the structure: a series of letters/stories, no chapter breaks? (What does it seem like, to you?)
3. What feelings has it brought up in you as you read it?
4. Based on these feelings, where might God be leading you in reading this novel?