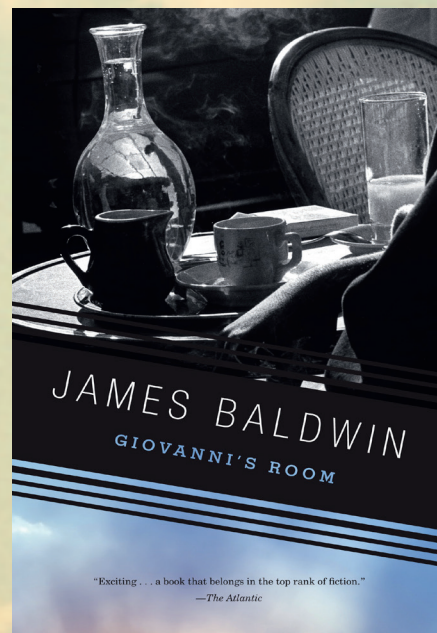
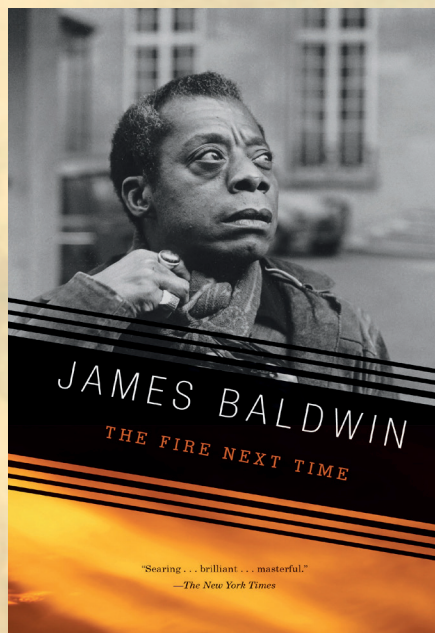
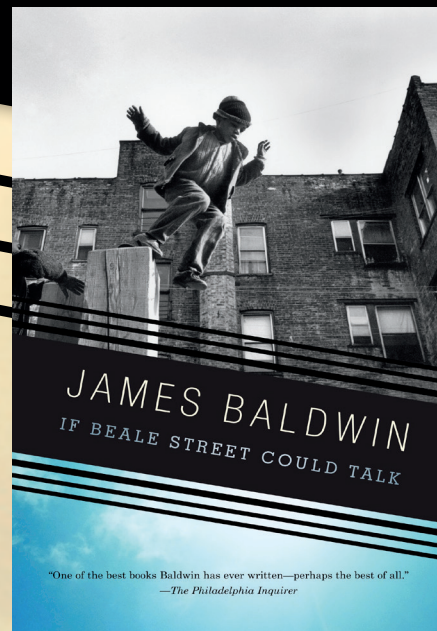
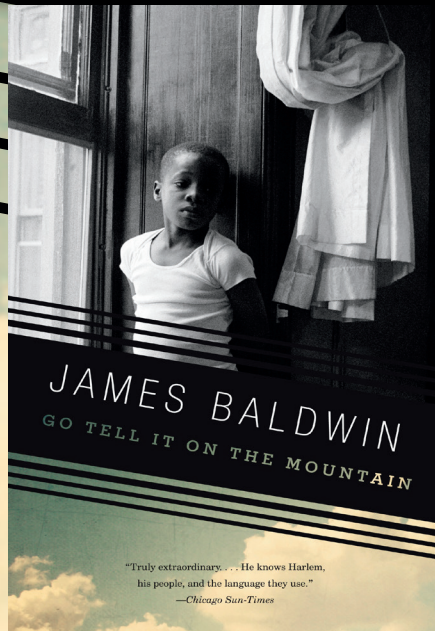


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# GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

A Novel by JAMES BALDWIN

## INTRODUCTION

Gaining power from its nuanced portrait of Black life and spirituality, James Baldwin's deeply perceptive debut novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is a compelling story of a young boy's coming of age that established Baldwin as one of the most celebrated writers of the twentieth century.

On the morning of his fourteenth birthday, John Grimes realizes two things: he has sinned and he does not want to grow up to be a Pentecostal minister like his father. With these two realizations, Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* chronicles John's struggle to assert his own identity while in the throes of moral, religious, and sexual turmoil that threatens to overcome him. While enmeshed in his greatest desires and his deepest fears, the prayers of John's aunt, father, and mother will untangle a decades-long history that spans from slavery to the Great Migration and reveals the role of the church as a source of both salvation and repression for generations of John's family.

The following questions are designed to enrich your discussion of James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. We hope they encourage thoughtful reflection and cultivate a deeper understanding of this searing debut, which positioned Baldwin as the voice of a generation.

## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is interspersed with prayers, hymns, and biblical verses as epigraphs between sections and as dialogue within chapters. Why do you think Baldwin chose to structure the novel in this way? How does this structure amplify your understanding of the totality of the church in the lives of the characters?
2. The novel is set primarily in 1935 Harlem. How does the time period and location impact the novel's plot and themes? As the characters grapple with godly aspirations and worldly desires, what challenges and temptations does the city present? In the end, are any of the characters able to harmonize their physical and metaphysical landscapes?
3. We meet John Grimes on his fourteenth birthday with the explanation that this was the day he realized he did not want to be like his father. What events solidified this decision? Have you ever felt pressure to follow in the footsteps of a parent or guardian? Share your own experience of confronting those expectations.
4. Reflecting on his family, John wonders, "If God's power was so great, why were their lives so troubled?" (page 143). Describe the Grimes family. Despite being deeply concerned with living a devout life, why do you think their lives were so troubled?
5. Gabriel is positioned as the religious, authoritative, and financial head of his family. How does Gabriel complicate his family's view on Christianity with his anger, abuse, and lies? Do you think his beliefs excuse his behavior?



# GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

A Novel by JAMES BALDWIN

6. Christian values shape each character's views on spirituality, sexuality, and morality. What does it take to be a good man or woman according to the church's teachings? What must be adopted, and what must be sacrificed? While each character struggles to live up to these standards, whose shortcomings are excused and whose are punished?
7. "Florence's Prayer" illuminates the complex relationship between religion and slavery in the American South. How is religion used to justify slavery and also bring about its end? In what ways do formerly enslaved characters use biblical stories to understand their own suffering? Decades after emancipation, why do you think the novel's characters return to religion during times of racial strife?
8. Aunt Florence is the first of many characters in the novel to flee the South during the Great Migration. Why does she leave, and what events are set in motion within her family as a result of this decision? What does the North represent to the novel's migratory characters, including Elizabeth, Richard, and Gabriel? Does New York meet their expectations?
9. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* sheds light on the lives of Black women as they navigate their ambitions, realize their sexuality, and face the difficult realities of love, marriage, and motherhood. How are their options limited by forces such as the church and patriarchal social conventions in the early twentieth century? What is the danger of being labeled a "fallen woman," and what lengths do these women go to to avoid being perceived in this way?
10. The story of Deborah's rape and its lasting impact on her life is horrific and distressing. How does the assault shape the town's perception of her? Why does Gabriel choose to marry her?
11. What is the root of Florence's hatred for her brother Gabriel? Do you think her anger is justified? What truths are revealed in their final confrontation?
12. A recurring image in the novel is of the steep climb up the side of the mountain. What does this mountain represent? What is waiting at the top, and why is the climb so difficult? In the end, do any of the characters make it up?
13. Gabriel spends much of his adult life trying to atone for the sins of his past. Do you think marrying Elizabeth and raising John gave him the closure he desired? By the end of the novel, has he forgiven himself or achieved the Lord's forgiveness that he strives for?
14. Elizabeth is described by her husband as "hardhearted, stiff-necked, and hard to bend" (page 111). Return to the early pages of "Elizabeth's Prayer." How is her upbringing shaped by her father's and aunt's opposing views, and what impact did it have on her own views on religion and morality? In what ways does she resist her husband's authority and control?

# GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

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15. The novel's main characters all wrestle with their fears of religious punishment and the ever-present threat of destruction. How do they cope with this pressure, and what solutions does the church provide? How does the desire to be saved from destruction and save loved ones link the characters to each other?
16. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* speaks to themes of ancestry and inheritance. Reflect on Gabriel's relationship with his sons Royal, John, and Roy. Why does he give his biological children the name Royal, and why is he troubled by the fact that only John has been saved?
17. Who is Elisha, and what is his role in the church? Why do you think he is an important figure in John's life? What is the significance of his kiss at the end of the novel?

## RECOMMENDED READINGS

*The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin

*Native Son* by Richard Wright

*If Beale Street Could Talk* by James Baldwin

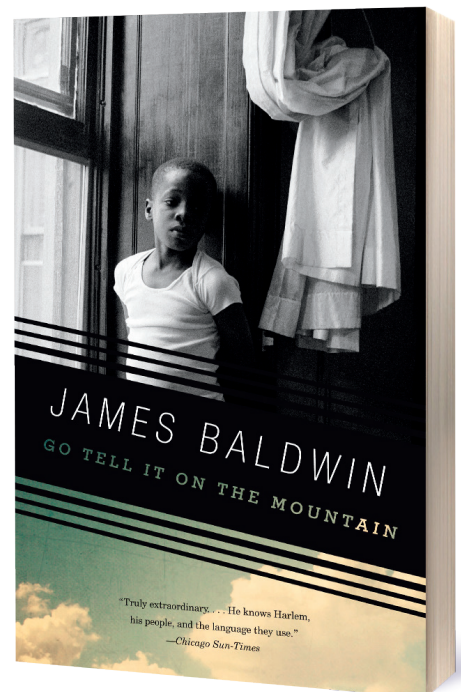
*Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison

*Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe

*Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison

*Beloved* by Toni Morrison

*The Amen Corner* by James Baldwin



# IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK

A Novel by JAMES BALDWIN

## INTRODUCTION

Nineteen-year-old Tish has a secret. She is pregnant with her fiancé Fonny's child. But to tell him, she must travel to the heart of New York City and into the depths of the Tombs, where Fonny is imprisoned, awaiting trial for a crime he did not commit.

So begins James Baldwin's 1974 novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*, a harrowing tale of a young woman's fight for justice. Forced to live with the consequences of a horrible crime, Tish's and Fonny's families will race against time to free the man they love for the arrival of his child. Equally a story of young love, of deep despair and small triumphs, and a searing indictment of a criminal justice system that will stop at nothing to tear this family apart, *If Beale Street Could Talk* reveals the dignifying power of love even in the face of cruelty, injustice, and suffering.

The following questions are designed to spark thoughtful reflection and meaningful discussion for your reading of James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*. We hope they enrich your experience of this poignant novel by one of America's most celebrated authors.

## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *If Beale Street Could Talk* is set in the U.S. during the early 1970s and was written in the context of the war on drugs, the rise of stop-and-frisk and no-knock warrants, and the beginning of mass incarceration. How are the novel's major plotlines and themes influenced by this political climate? How do the dialogue, fashion, and music evoke the atmosphere of the time and add to the realism of the novel? Is this a story you can imagine being retold in today's America? Why or why not?
2. The novel begins on the day that Tish tells her family she is pregnant with Fonny's child. How did Fonny, the Rivers family, and the Hunts react to the news? Was it what you expected? Share your own experience of making a special announcement to your friends and family.
3. How did the friendship between Tish and Fonny first begin? What early childhood experiences strengthened their bond, and what events led to their relationship growing into romantic love? How does Fonny's imprisonment affect their relationship, and what do they do to keep their partnership strong despite these conditions?
4. *If Beale Street Could Talk* takes place in New York City. How does Tish's view of the city expand and change over the course of the novel and her love story with Fonny? Are there any events in your own life that have complicated or forced you to reexamine the places you call home?
5. Describe Fonny's pad. If you were to have your own creative space, what would be in it? What do Fonny's few belongings reveal about his character and the things he holds dear? How does he cope with the loss of these comforts in prison?

# IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK

A Novel by JAMES BALDWIN

6. Who convinced Hayward to take Fonny's case, and why is the family reluctant to trust him? Do you think their distrust is warranted? What were Hayward's initial reservations about defending Fonny, and how does his attitude toward the case shift as the novel continues? Ultimately, what effect does taking the case have on him, and how does he try to fight for justice for Fonny?
7. In Greenwich Village, Fonny reunites with his childhood friend Daniel. Where has Daniel been for the past two years, and what does his narrative reveal about the horrors of the carceral system?
8. The fate of Fonny and his family is inextricably linked to Mrs. Rogers, the victim of the horrific rape that he has been accused of. Who is Mrs. Rogers, and how is she viewed by the family? Do they believe her? Why do they think she accused Fonny? How does the crime against Mrs. Rogers become a crime committed against an innocent family, and what forces make it so? In the end, does Mrs. Rogers, or anyone in the novel, ever get justice, peace, or healing?
9. During his meeting with Tish and Sharon, Hayward explains, "The truth of the case doesn't matter. What matters is—who wins" (page 93). What is the state's case against Fonny, and what are the inconsistencies in their timeline? What circumstances led to Fonny being charged for a crime he didn't commit, and how was the state able to keep him imprisoned without a trial? In the end, does anyone know the truth about who attacked Mrs. Rogers?
10. Why is Sharon sent to Puerto Rico, and who does she encounter during her trip? Did you expect her to return to New York successfully? What do you think she means when she says, "We on the same garbage dump. For the same reason" (page 185)?
11. How did you react to Tish and Fonny's first altercation with Officer Bell? What do you think would have happened if the Italian store owner had not intervened, and what does this reveal about the precarious nature of Black life at this time in America? What events are set in motion for the couple after this encounter?
12. Just when it feels like there is no hope left for the characters, they are buoyed by sincere acts of kindness and generosity from members of their community. Who are these characters, and how do they show up for Tish, Fonny, and their family when all forces seem to be against them?
13. As the chances of getting justice for Fonny grow smaller, what schemes do his family members contemplate to set him free, and what are they willing to risk or sacrifice for his return? Were you surprised that the Hunt women chose to cooperate with the D.A. instead?
14. Reflect on Fonny's upbringing. Why does he call the Rivers family "the only family I've ever had" (page 84)? Do you think it's true that Frank wasn't a real father to him, as Frank asserts on page 126?



# IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK

A Novel by JAMES BALDWIN

15. What emotions surfaced for you during the novel's closing sequence, and why do you think Baldwin chose to end the story in this way? What do you think the future holds for the characters after the novel's ending?
16. James Baldwin explores topics such as race, religion, poverty, and injustice in his fiction, and the novel touches on them all with great sensitivity and depth. What is one passage that stuck with you in particular and why? What insights does it provide?

## RECOMMENDED READINGS

*The Fortune Men* by Nadifa Mohamed

*The Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor

*The Street* by Ann Petry

*The Beautiful Struggle* by Ta-Nehisi Coates

*The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros

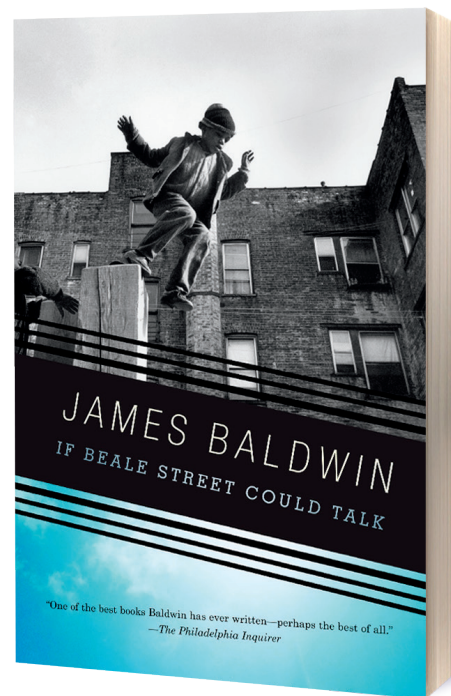
*The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison

*Go Tell It on the Mountain* by James Baldwin

*The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin

*Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin

*Going to Meet the Man* by James Baldwin



# THE FIRE NEXT TIME

## A Collection of Essays by JAMES BALDWIN

### INTRODUCTION

On the sixty-year anniversary of its publishing, James Baldwin's 1963 book of essays *The Fire Next Time* remains a touchstone in American literature. Comprising two "letters," *The Fire Next Time* offers both an intimate portrayal of Black American life and a fiery commentary on race in America that is just as resonant today as it was when it first emerged more than half a century ago.

In his first essay, "*My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation*," Baldwin speaks to a young generation navigating the country as it's caught between integration and segregation. Searing through the turbulence of the 1960s with clarity and unwavering honesty, Baldwin illuminates the lies on which racism stands and passes the torch to the young people who must continue the work of blazing the path toward true freedom in America.

In his second essay, "*Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind*," Baldwin examines the circumstances of his youth that led him to the church, the moral realizations that eventually forced him to leave it, and the meeting with Elijah Muhammad of the Nation of Islam that galvanized his views on race, religion, and nationalism.

A dire warning to confront racism and a final reminder that the only way forward is together, *The Fire Next Time* is a triumph that bears witness to America's racist past while revealing the way forward with love.

The following questions and topics are designed to enrich your discussion and meditation on James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. We hope they encourage thoughtful reflection and cultivate a deeper understanding of this essential read by the voice of a generation.

### QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin moves seamlessly between piercing social commentary and deeply reflective personal narrative. Why do you think Baldwin chose to combine the genres of essay and biography? How did doing so impact your understanding of his argument as well as your overall reading experience?
2. *The Fire Next Time* is deeply intergenerational, addressing three generations of Baldwin's family and pulling from centuries of Black history. Why does Baldwin emphasize the importance of knowing your history and where you come from? What role does the Black past play in shaping the future that he is working toward?
3. Baldwin writes "*My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation*" to his fifteen-year-old namesake, who is coming of age during the civil rights movement. Why would this letter be important to a Black child of this age at this time? What advice does Baldwin give to his nephew for navigating the country he's inherited?



# THE FIRE NEXT TIME

## A Collection of Essays by JAMES BALDWIN

4. While “*My Dungeon Shook*” is written to Baldwin’s fifteen-year-old nephew, “*Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind*” follows Baldwin from the age of fourteen onward. What is the relationship between the two letters? How are themes that were introduced in the first letter further illuminated in the second?
5. Why do you think Baldwin chose to write both essays as letters? While “*Down at the Cross*” doesn’t say who it’s addressed to, only where it’s from, who do you think the audience is?
6. In “*Down at the Cross*,” Baldwin returns to the image of the wine-and-urine-stained hallways of his youth. What does this image initially represent for him, and how does his perception of it change in the essay’s closing?
7. On page 26, Baldwin explains how Black children are conditioned from a young age to adhere to white authority. What role do parents play in this process, and what forces shape their actions? Is this ultimately harmful or protective? How did Baldwin react the summer he turned fourteen?
8. How does Baldwin view the relationship between the struggle of Black Americans and Christianity? What factors ultimately led to his disillusionment with the church?
9. Following his early years as a youth minister, Baldwin becomes critical of the church and skeptical of all religions that try to provide solutions to the struggle of Black Americans. What values take the place of organized religion in Baldwin’s life? How would you describe his morals, and how do you think they worked to advance his activism?
10. Despite his skepticism, Baldwin acknowledges the achievements of the Nation of Islam in addressing central issues faced by the Black community and asks how they were accomplished. What circumstances does he believe led to the Nation of Islam becoming a significant voice in the Black community?
11. Baldwin uses his meeting with the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam to introduce the rhetoric of the Black Power movement, including calls for nation-building and economic reparations, the embrace of the African past, and slogans of racial pride including “Black is beautiful.” What is Baldwin’s response to Black nationalism, and how does his vision of the future of the United States differ from those proposed by the Nation?
12. Why does Baldwin assert that self-definition is essential to navigating the world as Black people?
13. Baldwin pulls from the Black vernacular tradition by incorporating hymns, spirituals, and sermons in *The Fire Next Time*. What does this tradition add to the text, and how does it work to answer the question posed on page 103: “How can the American Negro past be used?”

# THE FIRE NEXT TIME

## A Collection of Essays by JAMES BALDWIN

14. *The Fire Next Time* is one of a growing list of books being banned in schools across America. How does this fact emphasize the challenge that Baldwin believes stands in the way of fully celebrating Black achievement in America?
15. The epigraphs to “*Down at the Cross*” quote Rudyard Kipling’s 1899 poem “*The White Man’s Burden*” and E. A. Hoffman’s 1878 hymn “*Down at the Cross*.” Consider reading the full-text versions of each. How does each author engage with Christian theology? Why do you think Baldwin chose to write in conversation with both texts?
16. How did you react to Baldwin’s final warning, “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!” (page 106)?
17. In 1963, Baldwin wrote, “You know, and I know, that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon” (page 10). Sixty years later, how does this text continue to speak to the state of Black life and race relations in America? Has the country accomplished emancipation yet?

### RECOMMENDED READINGS

*Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates

*Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* by Isabel Wilkerson

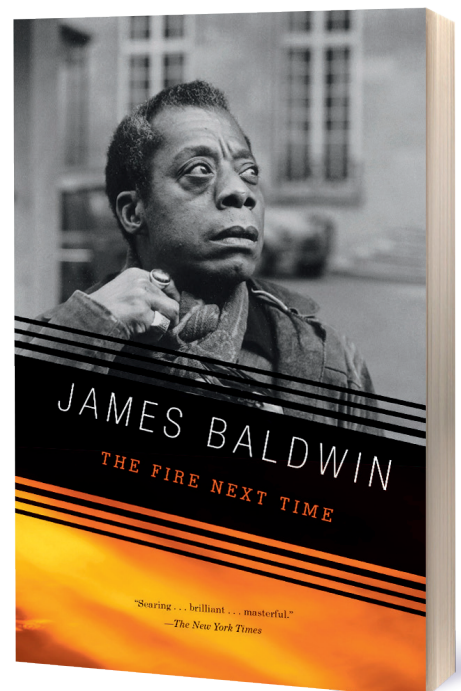
*Go Tell It on the Mountain* by James Baldwin

*Notes of a Native Son* by James Baldwin

*The Cross of Redemption* by James Baldwin

*Constructing a Nervous System* by Margo Jefferson

*There Will Be No Miracles Here* by Casey Gerald



# GIOVANNI'S ROOM

by JAMES BALDWIN

## INTRODUCTION

Heralded as a masterpiece and widely regarded as a touchstone of queer literature, James Baldwin's 1956 novel *Giovanni's Room* tells the story of a young American man's poignant love affair in 1950s Paris. Addressing questions of sexuality, morality, and nationality with an unflinching gaze and a sharp pen, Baldwin crafts an achingly honest tale of love, death, and desire that is raw, emotional, and absolutely unforgettable.

When David left America, he thought he would be able to find freedom on the foreign streets of Paris. Now his money is running low; his girlfriend, Hella, is traveling through Spain contemplating his marriage proposal; and his father's letters are urging his return. Unsure of his future, he has a chance encounter with Giovanni—a beautiful Italian bartender who is in Paris to mourn his own past—that leads to a reluctant yet passionate affair, one that will teach David that even the ocean isn't wide enough to escape the memories that he's spent years trying to outrun.

Caught between two lovers, torn between convention and passion, and hastened by Hella's return, David struggles to negotiate his origins, identity, and sexuality to make a decision that will shape his future. Told over the course of one tormented night that will end in tragedy, *Giovanni's Room* is a portrait of longing and a warning of the dangers of love suppressed that is equally moving, devastating, and brilliant.

The following questions are designed to enrich your reading group's discussion of *Giovanni's Room*. We hope they encourage thoughtful conversation and deepen your understanding of James Baldwin's modern classic.

## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Giovanni's Room* is told through David's intimate, first-person perspective as he looks back on his life and reflects on his love affair with Giovanni. Why do you think Baldwin chose to tell the story in this way? As a reader, how did this confessional form affect your experience of the novel? Imagine if the story were told from another character's perspective. How would it differ?
2. *Giovanni's Room* is set in 1950s Paris. How do the French dialogue and allusions to the state of postwar Europe add to the realism of the novel and evoke the atmosphere of the city? In what ways does this setting reflect the novel's central themes and moods?
3. Throughout the novel, David often returns to the image of his reflection, which seems to shift as he recounts his love affair with Giovanni. In chapter one, what does David see in his reflection? By the end of the novel, how has his perception of himself changed?
4. In chapter one, David introduces readers to the story of Joey. Who is Joey, and why is he important to understanding David's relationship with Giovanni? Why did David decide to keep this experience a secret, and what do you think this omission reveals about his character?



# GIOVANNI'S ROOM

by JAMES BALDWIN

5. The characters in *Giovanni's Room* live in a community of expatriates who met after arriving in Paris. Where did they come from, and why did they decide to flee their homelands? Do any of them find what they are looking for in Paris?
6. Giovanni's dire fate is revealed in the early pages of the novel. What feelings arose in you, knowing from the beginning how Giovanni's story would end? Do you think that this knowledge impacted your perception of the plot as it unfolded? Why might Baldwin have chosen to structure the story in this way?
7. David's relationship with his father is troubled by the feeling that his father left him unprepared to become a man. How does David's family define manhood, and how does this definition conflict with David's own manifestations of masculinity? Do you think David's father is to blame for his trouble reconciling the two?
8. Much of *Giovanni's Room* takes place in the gay bars and queer spaces that compose the novel's Parisian landscape. How does this atmosphere compare to that of the United States at this time? Was there ever a setting where David felt truly secure in his sexuality?
9. In the novel, numerous characters face stereotypes about their culture and countries of origin. Share your own experience of traveling away from home. Have you ever felt people made assumptions about you based on where you are from? How did you react?
10. Religion and morality are topics that Baldwin addresses in much of his writing, and *Giovanni's Room* makes notable references to the Bible, including the Garden of Eden, the curse of Ham, and Judas's betrayal. How does religion complicate David's understanding of his own sexuality and his relationship with Giovanni?
11. Through David's narrative, *Giovanni's Room* reveals the ways that external views on love and relationships can become internalized, leading to shame and alienation. Where does the pressure to marry a woman and have children come from, and how does David resist or fall victim to this norm? Have you ever felt pressure to reach a milestone, regardless of whether it was something you truly desired? Share your own experience of confronting those expectations.
12. The novel's title comes from the maid's room that Giovanni and David share during their love affair. Describe this setting. How does David's perception of it change as his relationship with Giovanni unravels? In the end, why does David believe it's imperative to escape Giovanni's room?
13. Sex is used by many of the characters as an avenue to avoid loneliness, find power, and escape lingering doubts about their sexuality. Do you think the novel portrays any healthy sexual or romantic relationships?
14. Describe David and Hella's relationship. Why does he propose to Hella, and why, despite her critiques of marriage, does she agree?

# GIOVANNI'S ROOM

by JAMES BALDWIN

15. Recall Giovanni and Hella's first meeting. How did this play out for David, and what events did this encounter set in motion?
16. Reflect on the characters of Jacques and Guillaume. Who are they, and what is their relationship with David and Giovanni? How would you characterize the dynamic between them? Supportive and encouraging? Exploitative and dangerous? A bit of both? What privileges do Jacques and Guillaume have that Giovanni and David, as well as Yves and Pierre, do not, and how do they use this power?
17. Return to the novel's closing scene. What is inside the envelope, and why does David tear it to pieces? Do you think it's significant that some of the pieces returned to David? Ultimately, do you think he will ever be able to escape what has happened to Giovanni?

## RECOMMENDED READINGS

*Another Country* by James Baldwin

*Just Above My Head* by James Baldwin

*Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* by James Baldwin

*Countries of Origin* by Javier Fuentes

*I Will Greet the Sun Again* by Khashayar J. Khabushani

*Sula* by Toni Morrison

*Rainbow Milk* by Paul Mendez

*All This Could Be Different* by Sarah Thankam Mathews

*The Fortune Men* by Nadifa Mohamed

*Dancer from the Dance* by Andrew Holleran

*Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley

*Romance in Marseille* by Claude McKay

*The Heart's Invisible Furies* by John Boyne

*The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

