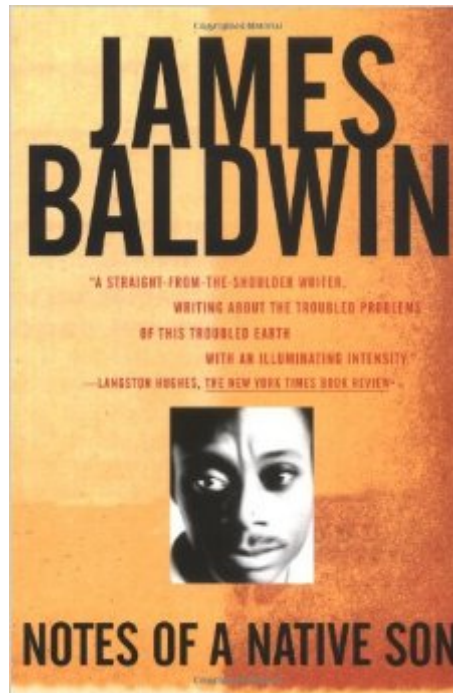


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Notes Of A Native Son (Beacon Paperback)



Synopsis

A new edition published on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Baldwin's death, including a new introduction by an important contemporary writer. Since its original publication in 1955, this first nonfiction collection of essays by James Baldwin remains an American classic. His impassioned essays on life in Harlem, the protest novel, movies, and African Americans abroad are as powerful today as when they were first written. "A straight-from-the-shoulder writer, writing about the troubled problems of this troubled earth with an illuminating intensity." —Langston Hughes, The New York Times Book Review "Written with bitter clarity and uncommon grace." —Time

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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.

I just finished James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son" yesterday. Published in 1955, it has lost none of its relevance on many levels, and one of these is his argument that the representations of African Americans in and through literature and in movies and the role in which devices such as the "protest novel" are used to assuage liberal guilt and really do not bring about true societal change and instead foster a false sense of understanding and identification that still maintains the "otherness" of the group whose problems or issues are addressed in the work. Baldwin sometime goes on tirades that are not always perhaps balanced but he interrogates issues so passionately and thoroughly and unconventionally that he really makes you think deeply about the gap between professed understanding and experienced reality.I think of this because I teach many African American works of literature to predominantly non-African American students whose backgrounds vary in understanding of issues of race, class, etc. And there is also the issue of racism itself--not as a personal issue alone, for almost all Americans can repeat the platitudes and provide anecdotes as to why they are not racist--but few truly understand institutional racism. Their minds go blank when you make the shift in discourse and you can see it on many white people's faces. And so it is with many issues of social justice and oppression that do not conform to the conventional model of discourse.I say this because it is actually a struggle to try and teach on these issues in all their complexity and basic reality, perhaps even more so now that Obama is president because this phenomena is misunderstood so deeply on many sides of the racial divide.

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