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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide



NoveList Book Discussion Guide
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Go Tell It on the Mountain
by
James Baldwin
(New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953)

Author:

James Baldwin was born on August 2, 1924 in Harlem, the illegitimate son of domestic worker Emma Berdis Jones and James Arthur, though he never knew his father. When he was three, his mother married factory worker David Baldwin, who was also a storefront preacher. By the time he was fourteen, James Baldwin had discovered his interest in writing, but he also followed his stepfather into preaching for the next two years. He once said of that time, "Those three years in the pulpit — I didn't realize it then — that is what turned me into a writer, really, dealing with all that anguish and that despair and that beauty"

(http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/baldwin_j.html).

He defied his stepfather who thought he should get a job to help the family and stayed in school. After graduation from high school, he worked in several menial jobs while beginning his writing career.

By 1943, Baldwin had begun writing full-time. That same year, his stepfather died in a mental hospital. Baldwin began getting work reviewing books in such publications as *The New Leader*, *The Nation*, *Commentary*, and *Partisan Review*; his work drew the attention of Richard Wright, who helped him get a Rosenwald Fellowship in 1948. The grant allowed him to move to Paris; he spent the next decade in Europe, largely in Paris and Istanbul. During this period, Baldwin finished the semi-autobiographical novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), a critical and commercial success recalling his family and the origins of his call to preach. "Mountain [*sic*] is the book I had to write if I was ever going to write anything else," Baldwin once said

(<http://www.randomhouse.com/features/baldwin/bio.html>).

He also wrote the play *The Amen Corner* in 1955.

In Baldwin's second novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1956), he explores a man's struggle with his homosexuality, an issue Baldwin had to come to terms with in his own life. In 1957 he returned to the U.S. in order to become involved in desegregation. *Nobody Knows My Name*, a collection of essays, followed in 1962.

Baldwin next wrote a bestseller called *The Fire Next Time* (1963), an essay in which he appraised the Black Muslim movement, and warned that violence would result if white America did not change its attitudes toward black Americans. The essay landed Baldwin on the cover of *Time* magazine — and on the FBI's watch list. Baldwin wrote prolifically during this time, including essays, novels, and plays.

After the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968, Baldwin returned to Paris. In the early 1970s he also suffered from writer's block. *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) ended the drought; it is a moving and poetic love story of a young talented sculptor, Fonny, and his pregnant girlfriend, Tish. In 1979, Baldwin published *Just above My Head*, about a group of friends who start out preaching and singing in Harlem churches.

In 1983, Baldwin became Five College Professor in the Afro-American Studies department of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He was made a Commander of the French Legion of Honor in June 1986. He made his last home in St. Paul de Vence on the Riviera, France, where he died of cancer in 1987.

Summary:

Go Tell It on the Mountain is the story of John Grimes and his family. Living in Harlem in 1935, John's father is a deacon at the family's church. In the course of a day and night, the reader will learn family secrets, and John will begin to come to terms with both his background and his destiny.

The book actually begins with John reflecting on Sunday church. In particular, he recalls a recent Sunday when the minister chastised John's friend Elisha, a seventeen-year-old boy, for getting too close to a young woman. The book then shifts to the present, a Saturday morning with John lying in bed. When John finally gets up, his mother, Elizabeth, demands that he do his chores. No one seems to remember that this is John's birthday. After John cleans the front parlor, however, his mother comes in and gives him some money and tells him to go out and buy himself something.

John leaves, passing through Central Park and down Fifth Avenue looking at stores before deciding to see a movie about a sinful woman whose life condemns her to hell. John feels connected to her, even though his sins do not come close to hers.

When John returns home, he discovers his brother Roy has been stabbed by a white man. His father Gabriel blames his mother for failing to watch the children, but Aunt Florence reminds Gabriel that he was the same way. Gabriel also makes clear his thoughts about how whites treat blacks.

John leaves to go clean the church with Elisha for Saturday night services, which his father will lead. Eventually, the rest of the family, including Aunt Florence, who ordinarily never comes, will join John at church along with several other people.

During the service, several people pray and remember events in their past. The first is Florence, who recalls growing up in the South with Gabriel, once a wild youth. A

neighbor, Deborah, was gang-raped by whites and then rejected by black men as a whore. Florence left and went north, over her mother's objections. After some time, Florence met and married Frank, but he drank too much and could never save money. Eventually, Frank left her, took up with another woman, and then died in France during World War I.

Next, Gabriel recalls his finally coming to Christ after a night with a woman. He began to preach after his mother died. Deborah cared for his mother at the end and then began to cook and wash for Gabriel. Eventually, he married her, despite her reputation.

Gabriel had an affair with Ester, a woman who worked at the same house where he tended the fields. Ester got pregnant, and Gabriel took Deborah's savings to send Ester away. She died in Chicago during childbirth. The child, named Royal, came back to live with Ester's parents; Gabriel never revealed he was the father and repaid the money, hoping Deborah had not noticed it missing. Royal grew up and returned to Chicago, then died in a gambling fight. A dying Deborah, noticing Gabriel's grief over Royal's death was too strong, realized the truth.

Finally, Elizabeth remembers growing up with her aunt after her mother died. Elizabeth met Richard as a bagger in a grocery in Maryland. They both moved to New York, where they worked in the same hotel and continued to date. One night, he was mistaken for a robber, arrested, and beaten. He eventually was set free, but the experience drove him to suicide. He died, not knowing she was pregnant with John. At a new job, Elizabeth met Florence, who introduced her to Gabriel, recently arrived after Deborah's death. Eventually, Gabriel married Elizabeth, promising to care for John as his own.

Emerging from her thoughts and prayers, Elizabeth finds John alone on the floor beneath the altar, under the power of God. John spends the night in a vision of being pulled down to hell and brought back again. In the midst of this, we learn of his sins, the worst of which seems to be seeing his father naked. He comes through the torturous vision and tells everyone of being saved, knowing he now is called to preach. Armed with that calling, John walks confidently back into his house with a new strength, ready to stand up to Gabriel's abusive behavior.

Questions:

1. What role does racism play in the text?
2. Why is Gabriel's relationship with John so conflicted?
3. What is Baldwin saying about religion through this book?
4. What is the struggle that brings John to his encounter with God on the church floor?
5. Is John struggling with being gay?
6. How does the structure of the novel affect the reader?
7. Why does Baldwin write as a novel what is essentially an autobiographical event?

Further Reading:

Richard Wright, [*Native Son*](#) (1940)

Bigger Thomas is a lair, thief, and finally a murderer in 1930s Chicago. We do not like this character, yet are compelled to ask questions about the poverty and racism that helped shape who he has become. Wright's classic novel of how racism creates exactly what it fears still resonates today.

Ralph Ellison, [*Invisible Man*](#) (1952)

Ellison's only completed novel, *Invisible Man* chronicles the life of an unnamed black man who grows up in the South, gets expelled from an all-black college, and moves to New York City, where he fares no better. Along the way, he attempts to discover his identity in a hostile world that refuses to acknowledge his existence.

Zora Neal Hurston, [*Their Eyes Were Watching God*](#) (1937)

Janie Crawford, a woman living in Eaton, Florida, has had three husbands, one of whom she killed. Hurston's use of dialect and capturing of life in a black community is still recognized as masterful decades later.

Toni Morrison, [*Song of Solomon*](#) (1977)

Morrison's third novel tells the story of "Milkman" Dead and his family struggling in Michigan. The novel explores the lasting effects of slavery through four generations of a family.

Lorraine Hansberry, [*A Raisin in the Sun*](#) (1959)

Hansberry's play follows the lives of three generations of the Younger family growing up in Chicago in the early days of the civil rights struggle. Follow the family's attempts to make their way out of poverty amidst the setbacks that befall them.

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This Book Discussion Guide was developed by Kevin Matthews, an Episcopal priest and former Duke University writing instructor now living in Durham, NC.